

READER

year in
review

IN THIS ISSUE

YEAR IN REVIEW

- 04 The Reader** The story of 2020, as told through some of our favorite covers
- 06 Food** Chicago restaurants ate shit this year. A lot of shit was still pretty great.
- 08 Joravsky | Politics** I think we can all agree the next year has got to be better.
- 10 News** On the violence, sadness, and hope of 2020
- 14 Isaacs | Culture** She earned the title—still he was dissing her! Would he do the same to, say, Dr. Kissingner?
- 16 Activism** These individuals took 2020 by the horns and made their mark on Chicago—and the world.
- 18 Lit** The ten best Chicago books of 2020

- 20 The Internet** The year of TikTok
- 21 Dance** In a year of loss, we found that dance is everywhere.
- 22 Theater** Chicago theater artists rose to challenges—and created new ones—in 2020.
- 24 Movies** Relive the year in film with these double features.
- 28 Albums** The best overlooked Chicago records of 2020
- 30 Gig Posters** The Reader got creative to find ways to keep uplifting Chicago artists in 2020.
- 32 Musicians** The music scene doubled down on mutual aid and fundraising for community groups.

FILM

- 26 Movies of note** Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is just as beautiful as it is heartbreaking, News of

the World offers tidy lessons on American power dynamics, and Wild Mountain Thyme features one of the most agonizing courtships in movie history.

MUSIC & NIGHTLIFE

- 34 Chicagoans of Note** Doug Malone, owner and lead engineer, Jamdek Recording Studio
- 35 Records of Note** A pandemic can't stop the music, and this week the Reader reviews current releases by DJ Earl, the Miyumi Project, Freddie Old Soul, Mark Lanegan, Live Skull, and more.
- 39 Early Warnings** Rescheduled concerts and other updated listings
- 39 Gossip Wolf** Art-pop wizard Sen Morimoto takes over booking at the Hideout, and self-described

"bootgaze" crew the Keener Family return with a second EP.

OPINION

- 40 National Politics** When politicians sell out, we all lose.
- 42 Savage Love** Dan Savage answers questions about monsters in bed and mothers-in-law.

CLASSIFIEDS

- 43 Jobs**
- 43 Apartments & Spaces**
- 43 Marketplace**

ON THE COVER: EVA MARIA LEWIS, FEATURED ON PAGE 16. PHOTO BY JEFF MARINI. FOR MORE OF MARINI'S WORK, GO TO JEFFMARINI.COM

EDITORS' PICKS



Essays as group therapy

How are Black writers coping? We're chanting, fact-checking history, and envisioning a tiny future.



The Gaming Issue

When we keep defining the "new normal" every day, games will always connect us.



'No other way forward'

Black artistic leaders reflect on those who shaped them and the future they envision.



The best Chicago albums of the 2010s

The Reader polled dozens of critics to arrive at an absolutely indisputable ranked list of several hundred records that will definitely not start any arguments.



That lockout you witnessed? It didn't happen.

Ex-cops attempted to throw out a Rogers Park tenant at gunpoint. The police report tells a different story.



This land is my land

For generations, my family has owned a piece of untold Black history in Boley, Oklahoma. This year, I finally got to see it.



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EDITORIAL ASSOCIATE S. NICOLE LANE
PRODUCTION MANAGER KIRK WILLIAMSON
LISTINGS COORDINATOR SALEM COLLO-JULIN
SOCIAL JUSTICE REPORTING FELLOW ADAM M. RHODES
CONTRIBUTORS ED BLAIR, NOAH BERLASKY, LUCA CIMARUSTI, MARISSA DE LA CERDA, MARI COHEN, NINA LI COOMES, JOSH FLANDERS, SHERI FLANDERS, JACK HELBIG, IRENE HSAIO, BECCA JAMES, CATALINA MARIA JOHNSON, MONICA KENDRICK, STEVE KRAKOW, NOËLLE D. LILLEY, MAX MALLER, ADAM MULLINS-KHATIB, J.R. NELSON, JEFF NICHOLS, MARISSA OBERLANDER, ARIEL PARRELLA-AURELI, KATHLEEN SACHS, CATEY SULLIVAN

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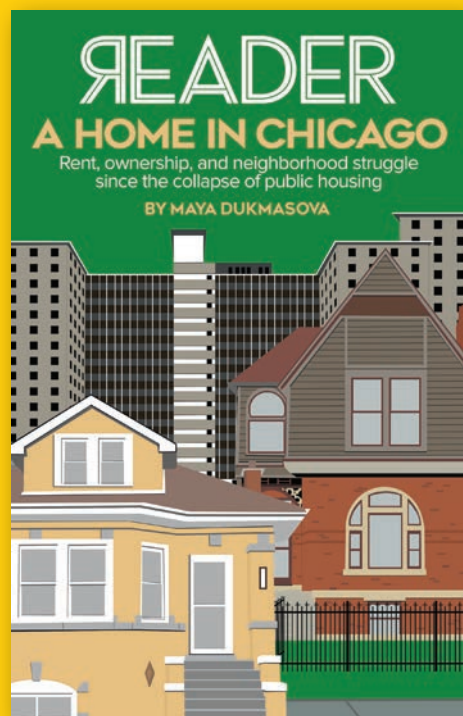
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Year in Review

A year in Reader covers

The story of 2020, as told through some of our favorite covers



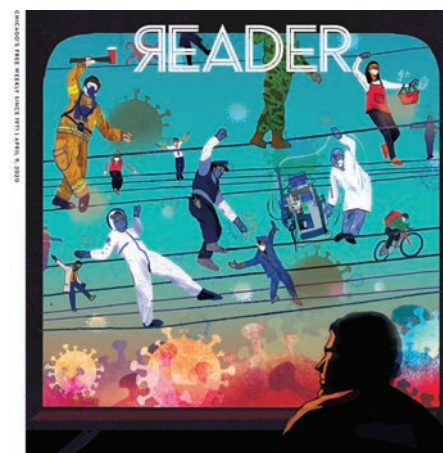
March 5: "Welcome to Chicago, capital of the midwest"
ILLUSTRATED BY BOBBY SIMS



March 19: "Do not touch"
PHOTO BY SAMANTHA BAILEY



March 26: "Stay at home"
PHOTO BY SAMANTHA BAILEY



April 9: "Essential workers"
ILLUSTRATION BY NGUYEN TRAN



April 16: "The city is dead, are we next?"
PHOTO BY LLOYD DEGRANE



June 4: "Serve and protect?"
PHOTO BY SAMANTHA BAILEY



June 18: "The last responders"
PHOTO BY GONZALO GUZMAN



September 3: "The Education Issue"
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November 12: "Bound to the Point"
PHOTO BY DAVID TRAVIS

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Year in Review | Food & Drink



FOOD FEATURE

The year in pivots

Chicago restaurants ate shit this year. A lot of shit was still pretty great.

By **MIKE SULA**

Usually I spend a couple sentences in my look back at the year in food mourning the new places that, despite my earnest love for them, didn't make it past that first critical year or so. It's by that standard that I'm going to declare 2020 one of the greatest years in Chicago restaurant history.

Kidding! We all know how much it sucked.

Even if the Powerhouse, Julia Gham's Cameronian restaurant, was the only wonderful new restaurant in Chicago to fall victim to the virus, that would be enough to make this an awful year in eating.

But it was much, much worse than that, wasn't it? You struggle for words to describe it. Catastrophic isn't overwrought. And it still isn't over. The bailout the restaurant industry so desperately needs is nowhere in sight, and what's happening now as a result has been loudly predicted since March. Everybody knew carryout and a summer of patio and limited indoor dining would not be enough, and now we're watching all the awful predictions unfold in real time.

If Powerhouse suffered the curse of being the second restaurant I write about in a year, at

least the first, Lao Peng You, is still cranking out its magnificent dumplings, if only for carryout. Andersonville's Little Madrid is still serving tapas, and Lincoln Square's Serbian O16 is still kicking too, converting to a sandwich shop next week. I'm nearly convinced the white *ma po* tofu ramen at Des Plaines's Chicago Ramen inoculated me from COVID-19 because shortly after I sucked it up, everything fell apart really fast. I'm grateful to it, and all the others that have persevered.

There were so many closings, permanent and hopefully temporary, but there was still just too much good food to write about, from Mickey Neely's pizza at Ludlow Liquors, to the new deli Jeff and Jude's, to Milly's Pizza in the Pan.

In the early days it was heartening to see how restaurant people quickly mobilized to help one another, whether it was the quick thinkers behind Dining at a Distance, aggregating all the carryout intel on one handy site. Or how Erick Williams's Virtue crew dropped carryout to make hot meals for nighttime residents at the University of Chicago Medical Center. What

about how 80 of the city's best chefs and bartenders contributed recipes to our community cookbook, *Reader Recipes: Chicago Cooks and Drinks at Home*, benefitting the paper and the Comp Tab Relief Fund for out-of-work hospitality workers? I hope we do one of those every year to come. (You can still buy it.)

But one thing I did not want to do when patios and dining rooms reopened this summer was police restaurants and their COVID safety protocols. I yelled at enough assless maskholes in grocery and liquor stores on my own time. I didn't want it to become my job. I ate on one patio this summer, and it was nerve-wracking. Even if it was safe, it didn't feel like it.

So I spent my time seeking out hospitality workers who were figuring out how to make a living making food safely outside the conventional brick-and-mortar restaurant paradigm. And just as it was in Chicago's recent golden age of restaurant openings, there were almost too many stories to tell. Everywhere you looked, furloughed chefs and workers were popping up, introducing the city to food it

Lucky for you, Lao Peng You's dumplings are still available for carryout. 📍 JEFF MARINI FOR CHICAGO READER

never knew outside of a home kitchen, like the underrepresented regional treasures of Jasmine Sheth's Tasting India Series, or Ethan Lim's full embrace of Khmer food at Hermosa, or Yuta Katsuyama filling the *onigiri*-shaped void in Chicago's Japanese fast food scene.

One of the common denominators of these stories was that each chef was reaching back into their histories and drawing on food traditions and cultures that might not have a place in the old Chicago restaurant world, from the Vietnamese treats of the Snack Collective, to Eve Studnicka (Dinner at the Grotto) and Alexis Thomas's (Black Cat Kitchen) Midwest-ern-weird mobile supper club. And then there was Furious Spoon's Shin Thompson fully embracing Japanese curry at Bokuchan, thanks to the low overhead of a ghost kitchen; John Avila focusing on the food of Indonesia's North Sulawesi with Minahasa; and the regional Malaysian food of Kedai Tepao—all delivered to your door by the hustling chefs who made it themselves.

Producers and purveyors had to adjust too, but wondrous things happened. There was the opening of Griffith, Indiana's The Wurst, a butcher shop specializing in small-scale, pasture-raised, GMO- and antibiotic-free meats, while farmer Vera Videnovich was saving old Balkan crops with a Native American growing method, and Rachel Kimura was growing uncommon Japanese produce according to the principles of an experimental, anything-goes natural farming philosophy.

I was privileged to witness and document the resilience of operators who just kept pushing through, making great food however they could, like Atichat and Inon Srisawangpan of Uptown's In-On Thai, which came roaring back to business only to have to contract and sell its great food through a window. Or Dinkey DaDiva, creator of the jerk chicken egg rolls (and 70-some others), starting her empire in a suburban gaming parlor chain. Or Rafael Esparza and Mitchell AbouJamra, who opened a novel "COVID-proof" Lebanese-Mexican mashup Evette's. Or Passerotto's Jennifer Kim, who took a deep breath after the restaurant uproar that ignited in tandem with the George Floyd protests to ponder what an entirely reimagined restaurant culture might look like.

In the prolonged nightmare of 2020, these were the stories that gave me enough hope to consider that Chicago food might come out even stronger on the waking side. 📍

🐦 @MikeSula

POETRY CORNER

Revolution Begins Within

by Nikki Patin

Revolution begins within
Whips, boots, chains, gas ovens
Roiling inside my DNA

Trauma generational
Oppression navigational
As my path has been shaped by hatred

Starting with my mirror
Only works if it's hanging on a wall
Built with integrity

But if every time I look myself in the eye
The mirror crashes into dirt
Rebranded as sky

Then shards fly
Vision denied
By all the blood in my eyes

While I walk
Bent, leaning
Desperate to find my upright

On land crooked
As stars obscured by fire

What revolution can I find?
What revolution is mine?

If it all begins within my skin
If revolution is my only friend

But I get dizzy with the spins

Gotta lay down and squint
To even believe in a horizon

How do I fight?
Is it even possible to win?

What if I detest throwing hands?
What if rolling around in gutters dirty
with disinvestment isn't even possible
Because I'm too busy grinding myself
Into bread
Too busy twerking myself into circus
So I can charge admission to
A show no one's watching

Only fans are blades whirling overhead
Blue birds laughing at us roaches
Scattering ourselves dark
Desperately feasting on scraps from
Tables built by those who will never
Rest their hands on polished wood

Ready to set orders on backs
Beveled by lack

So what does revolution bring?
If whirling circles never move
Beyond borders built for closing

What does revolution mean?
To those othered into only serving

How can revolution ring?
If even our simplest melodies are hijacked
Into voices too thin for thundering

The revolution begins within
Is tattooed on my back
Tesseract laid across my atlas bone
To give me time

My ancestors will never get back
Microphone with cord
Labyrinth capped with pen
scored around arms
Weak with holding

Myself in peace
To head off a war

I never started
Certainly never ordered

I never learned how to fight
In a body fat
Layered in harm ignored

Laying still
Playing dead
never worked

And so revolution
Revolving me
Resolving me

Into blood
Dust
Rust of iron
Left too long in fires

Set to turn me
Mine into ash

Sown into futures
We can never reap

Featured in *The Guardian*, *Chicago Tribune*, HBO's *Def Poetry Jam* and on international television and radio, writer, producer, designer and survivor Nikki Patin has been advocating, performing and educating for 20 years. She has performed at the National Black Theater in Harlem, Brooklyn Museum, the Goodman Theater, EXPO Chicago and many other spaces throughout the US, New Zealand and Australia. Nikki Patin holds an MFA in Creative Non-Fiction from the University of Southern Maine. Patin is the Community Engagement Director for the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation and the founder and Executive Producer of Surviving the Mic, a survivor-led organization that crafts brave and affirming space for survivors of sexual trauma. Her work can be found at nikkipatin.com.

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Year in Review | News & Politics



POLITICS

Looking ahead

I think we can all agree the next year has got to be better.

By **BEN JORAVSKY**

As we all know by now, 2020 was miserable. Worst year ever—at least in my lifetime.

Though, now that I think about it, a strong case could be made for 1968 . . .

Dr. King killed. Bobby Kennedy killed. West side up in flames. Cops pound the crap out of hippie demonstrators outside the Hilton. War raging in Vietnam. Nixon commits treason and then gets elected president.

Yes, upon reflection, '68 gives '20 a run for its money.

I won't bother with this year's lowlights. You lived through it—you know the score. Basically, it was Trump, death, Trump, death, Trump . . .

So, I'll forgo the usual look-back-at-the-year-that-was column.

Instead, I'll look forward—to all the things I hope to do (again!) in the future. If this vaccine really does its job and this fucking virus passes.

Sorry about that language.

Hence, in no particular order, I'm looking forward to . . .

Watching all the big games (Super Bowl, NBA playoffs, World Series) on the big TV screen at the house of Cap, my dear friend who I hardly saw these last few months. But don't expect the Bears to be in any of those big games, not until they get management that's not prejudiced against Black quarterbacks . . .

And going to Bulls games at the United Center with Norm—who I haven't seen in ages. Hey, all you front-running Chicagoans who claim to be Laker fans—there's plenty of room on the Bulls bandwagon. I'm telling you—the rookie can play.

And going to Monday night bowling at Timber Lanes. In honor of Monday night bowling, I'll now indulge myself in a chant made famous by the Blasters, another team in the league.

All together now . . .

"I'm a Blaster, you're a Blaster; we're a Blaster, all. And when we get together, we lick each other's balls."

Well, I may have improved that last line a little bit.

What else?

The Hideout! Can't wait to get back to First Tuesdays. Me and Maya up on the stage with a live audience of fellow political geeks, all of us sitting through Tim Tuten's never-ending introduction. He swears he's gonna be brief—but, of course, he never is.

And dining out with my wife and our friends. At real restaurants. With servers. And other diners at other tables. Hey, Loreen and Byron—don't forget that remote we're gonna do in Chinatown!

And sharing Thanksgiving dinner with our daughters and their friends—not a mask in sight. As we go around the table saying all the things we're thankful for. Like just being together.

And drinking margaritas at our kids' annual Chanukah party, the house filled with dozens and dozens of millennials. Though it's the old guys—Cap and Norm—who are the last to leave every year.

And having a barbeque on the Fourth of July in Indiana where the Days, the dearest of friends, now live. And walking along the beach just east of Gary, looking at the skyline from the other side.

And catching up with Gaylon, Pippi, Ron, and all their kids, who I don't see nearly enough as it is. And don't see at all during the plague.

And visiting old friends—like Monroe and Joyce—in person. As opposed to looking at them on Google Meet . . .

And going to White Sox games. But not to

So long, 2020—hello, 2021! And sports, family, friends, holidays, music, plane rides, and more . . .
SHUTTERSTOCK

Wrigley. Won't go near the Cubs so long as those MAGA-loving Ricketts own them.

And going to Northwestern football games with Mickey D, and talking politics the whole game.

And going to the NU homecoming party at Udawok and Tracy's house, which fills up with 60-something-year-old graduates who fly in from all over the country.

And going to the movies—every weekend. Man, I miss the movies.

And going to the Black Harvest Film Festival at the Gene Siskel Film Center on oldies night, when they bring back a movie I haven't seen in ages.

And just walking along the lakefront and not worrying if the maskless MAGA guy coming my way is bearing a virus.

And seeing Joey DeFrancesco at the Jazz Showcase.

And Ramsey Lewis at the Jazz Festival.

And the Isley Brothers, the O'Jays, and George Clinton at Grant Park on Geezer Sunday at Taste of Chicago, where they feature groups for older people like me.

And taking a cab to the airport to catch a plane to California to visit my daughter, who I haven't seen in months because of this damn virus.

And driving to the beach and looking out on the Pacific Ocean and gearing up for whatever political struggles await me back in Chicago.

Yeah, I look forward to all of that—and more—once this pandemic passes.

I'll say one good thing about a pandemic. It gave me a ton of downtime to read a bunch of books, including *The Cold Millions*—Jess Walter's latest novel. Which I recommend to one and all.

It's about the western labor battles of the early 1900s between the Wobblies and the coldhearted millionaires who owned the mines. Near the end, it has an enduring passage where the book's heroine, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, says:

"Men sometimes say to me: *You might win the battle, Gurley, but you'll never win the war.* But no one wins the war. Not really. I mean, we're all going to die, right?"

"But to win a battle now and then? What more can you want?"

So, let's take a break for the holidays and then start it again. 'Cause the battle doesn't end until the war is over.

@bennyjshow

ARE WE THERE YET?

Eviction

Since March, the federal, state, and local versions of an eviction moratorium have kept thousands in their homes. While typically there are some 20,000 eviction cases filed every year, as of December 14, only about 6,600 eviction cases have been filed against Chicago residential and commercial tenants—and 65 percent of those cases were initiated before the governor issued his first moratorium. Landlords are still allowed to file cases if there's an emergency, but they have to prove that a tenant is a danger to neighbors or is destroying the property. However, the vast majority of eviction proceedings here, as everywhere in the country, start because tenants are behind on their rent, not because they're in violation of their lease.

Since the spring, tenants' rights groups have been agitating on behalf of the few defendants that are still being hauled into eviction court, as well as those who've faced illegal lockouts. But the moratorium seems to be working to keep many people stable in their homes through the pandemic as they contend with extreme uncertainty, loss of income, and remote learning. Just as COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on low-income African Americans, so does eviction; most of the tenants in Chicago's eviction courtrooms on

Protest

People of color—especially Black folks—feel free to sit out this first-paragraph pop quiz and skip ahead. Everyone else: When was the last time you thought about George Floyd? If the recently released body cam footage of CPD's 2019 atrocity against a Black body wasn't in the news, would you be thinking about police brutality? Would you spend any time sitting with your anxiety about the lack of safety and dignity for Black Chicagoans? Don't know? No? That's why people protest. Because when we don't, the city forgets. People forget how the inequities everyone talks about so earnestly these days endanger

any given day are Black women. Meanwhile, landlords have been lobbying the city and county against taking further steps to protect tenants, such as the "just cause" eviction ordinance or lifting the ban on rent control in Springfield. Their argument throughout the pandemic has been that this is not the time to be introducing drastic changes to the laws governing landlord-tenant relations.

I've been dropping into seminars and discussions hosted by local landlord groups. The tone is always one of resigned frustration about the moratorium, but when the conversation turns to bottom lines, the landlords seem to be doing alright. The Neighborhood Building Owner's Alliance recently reported that 92 percent of landlords collected half or more of all the rent due in September. Forty-six percent of them said they had collected upward of 95 percent of rents. At public hearings landlords' spokespeople certainly conjure an idea of struggling "housing providers," but a shrinking profit margin isn't the same as being in the red.

The current Illinois eviction moratorium is set to expire on January 11. What will happen once the court system is open to these cases again? Experts predict an "avalanche" of evictions post-COVID and local landlords worry about the backlog in case processing. Tenants' groups worry about a mass descent into poverty for people who had no evictions in their background, but will now face the rental market with a scarlet letter.

There are no requirements for landlords to report how much they make, but new scholarship indicates the profit margins in the poorest neighborhoods, where property ownership is increasingly consolidated in fewer and fewer hands, are particularly wide. If most Chicago landlords make it out of the pandemic without bankruptcy while the health crisis delivers a new generation of evictees, maybe this year will get us closer to understanding the mysterious economic forces at play in our housing market. —MAYA DUKMASOVA

Nearly 20 years ago during an interview about the AIDS crisis, an LGBTQ+ advocate told me that the fight for our rights was waged on multiple fronts: we needed activists both outside chaining themselves to city hall and inside sitting at the table with the mayor. It's an idea that's stayed with me as I've learned more about all of the civil rights movements I carry with me as a Black queer woman, and it's no less true today. The racism and brutality that killed George Floyd didn't stop when the protests stopped. Too many of us live with these traumas every day. We can't forget them, and protests help ensure no one else does either. —KAREN HAWKINS

On the violence, sadness, and hope of 2020

actual people every day, not just the caricatures you follow on Twitter. I didn't attend a single protest this summer; the protests came to me. I lived in a high-rise downtown, and before you make that *Well aren't you bougie face?* that even my own father has made at me, you should know that being a Black lady living in the Loop is in the best of times complicated, and in the worst of times a dystopian nightmare. Because I lived downtown, the city and its taxpayer-funded terror squads wanted to protect me at all costs, weaponizing infrastructure to keep "outsiders" out. Because I am Black, they wanted to protect my neighbors from me. It was a long summer.

Nearly 20 years ago during an interview about the AIDS crisis, an LGBTQ+ advocate told me that the fight for our rights was waged on multiple fronts: we needed activists both outside chaining themselves to city hall and inside sitting at the table with the mayor. It's an idea that's stayed with me as I've learned more about all of the civil rights movements I carry with me as a Black queer woman, and it's no less true today. The racism and brutality that killed George Floyd didn't stop when the protests stopped. Too many of us live with these traumas every day. We can't forget them, and protests help ensure no one else does either. —KAREN HAWKINS

NO MORE FETTER

Violence

Few things brought anti-trans rhetoric, legislation, and violence to the fore this year more than the words of a children's author. J.K. Rowling published numerous writings targeting trans people—trans women and children in particular. The same woman who created a world where wizards and witches can transform into beetles, dogs, and cats, rejects the idea that, for some, gender and sex are not aligned.

Her poorly crafted statements, which continue unabated, have been repeatedly criticized by activists as well as doctors, biologists, scientists, and anyone with an ounce of empathy. Long revered as a literary icon, Rowling now places herself with an proud transphobes, including our very own He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

But the trouble is, bigoted and vile words like hers are not always empty. Words like these influence politics, policy, and actions, and have emboldened many to speak out against transgender-inclusive policies that they say are a threat to women's rights.

The American Civil Liberties Union reported that by March, state legislators across the country had introduced troves of bills aimed at rolling back rights for transgender people. Many proposed bills took aim at transgender rights broadly; in Iowa, for example, legislators introduced a bill that would remove gender identity as a protected class under the state's civil rights act. Here in Illinois in February, state representative Darren Bailey, a Republican from the 109th district, introduced a bill that would require the state's Department of Corrections to house incarcerated people based on their biological sex, regardless of their gender identity.

Others even targeted transgender youth. Legislators in a number of states, including Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, and Missouri, introduced bills aimed at blocking transition-related health care for youth and bills aimed at restricting transgender youth from competing on teams that align with their gender identity, but not their biological sex.

Despite this year's historic uprisings for social justice and against racism and police brutality, and seemingly renewed support for marginalized communities, 2020 has seen staggering violence against the transgender community, particularly Black and Brown transgender women. At least 40 transgender murdered, a sobering statistic the Human Rights Campaign reports is the highest number it has tracked since 2013—but still a low estimate considering the myriad of barriers to knowing the actual number.

So while activists, social media personalities, and everyday people, incredibly, speak out

in greater numbers for trans rights, it's crucial to remember that the fight isn't just about one author's harmful tweets or retrograde legislation; for many people at the epicenter of the violence, it's a matter of living to see another day. —**ADAM M. RHODES**

Therapy

I celebrated my one-year anniversary of therapy three months into the pandemic. The timing of investing in my mental health was kismet, just ahead of spending nine months in isolation.

A study by the CDC done in late June reported "considerably elevated adverse mental health conditions" due in part to separation from friends and family, fear of catching and/or spreading COVID, and the looming specter of death. And that was in the summer, far before some of us started feeling the full weight of pandemic fatigue, when we could still enjoy the outdoors and the sun didn't set until 8 PM.

It's overwhelming to think about how our collective mental health has suffered this year, but it's also forced some meaningful changes. More than ever before, I see friends, family, and social media acquaintances sharing personality and more. Never underestimate the power of feeling like you're not alone and being able to share coping mechanisms.

Therapists and other wellness professionals adapted to virtual practices, many removing the barrier of access by offering discounted or free services when possible. I particularly enjoyed a change of scenery for my weekly sessions. There's something cathartic about having an emotional breakdown in front of my therapist in my car and then driving away, leaving some of my demons behind in the Dollar Tree parking lot. Even being trapped at home wasn't so bad. New habits like cooking for myself and going on walks have become practices that I had convinced myself I never had time for in the before times.

My original impetus for starting therapy

continued from 13

was an attempt to get my shit together before I turned 30. This milestone, I learned through therapy, should not be any kind of marker of my success or capabilities as a grown-up. The vaccine won't put an end to my mental health journey. I am not immune to the anxiety, depression, body image issues, substance use, impulsive spending, and more that now feel synonymous with 2020. But the past year taught me the importance of preventative care, and I hope at least one silver lining on this dark cloud of a year is that others have realized the same. —**BRIANNA WELLEN**

Police

Sometime in the early morning hours of June 1, while protests in reaction to the killing of George Floyd and systemic racism had started unraveling into riot status, the south side campaign office of Congressman Bobby Rush was transformed into a lounge area of sorts for some Chicago Police Department personnel. Video footage from security cameras, released by the mayor's office in the following week, showed an officer taking a nap on a couch, another gazing at their cell phone, and several officers resting their heads on desks. In all, five hours of video captured a group of officers doing not a lot, and at one point 13 officers (including three supervisors) can be seen inside.

It wasn't lost on anyone who viewed this footage that the optics were poor; a virtual sleepover happened at a congressman's storefront while the stores in a strip mall right next door at 54th and Wentworth were being relieved of their goods. Even Chicago Police superintendent David Brown, then new to his job, expressed vehement disapproval at the subsequent press conference. "If you sleep during a riot what do you do during a regular shift when there's no riot?" he said. Later that month, Fraternal Order of Police president John Catanzara told ABC7's Chuck Goudie in a follow-up story that the officers might have been assigned to protect Rush's office from looters. A spokesperson for Rush told Goudie that no one from his staff had contacted the CPD for such protection.

For my money, the *pièce de résistance* of response to this situation came from Congressman Rush himself during the press conference. With clear frustration in his voice, he said, "They had the unmitigated gall to make coffee for themselves and go and pop popcorn. My popcorn. In my microwave." Kudos to the congressman for using the ever-evocative "unmitigated gall," the ultimate phrase of utter disgust at foolishness. While its origins are obscure, "unmitigated gall" has been used by everyone from *Star Trek: The Next Genera-*

tion's Worf to country songwriting legend Mel Tillis to decry the audacious nerve of those who may dare to usurp us. What better way to describe so many of the events of 2020. The utter and absolute unmitigated gall. —**SALEM COLLO-JULIN**

Status Quo

Lollapalooza organizers historically schedule most of the local performers at the very beginning of each day, and those noontime sets do few favors for the artists considering even the early birds are still going through security around that time; compound that with the fact that Chicagoans already make up such a tiny fraction of the lineup for a four-day gathering that features nearly 200 acts, and local music is minimally represented at best. Concert promoters C3 Presents, which is based out of Austin, Texas—and which multinational entertainment company Live Nation purchased a controlling stake of in 2014—runs the show. Lolla strikes me as an event that celebrates capital over culture; its best bookings are a curious side effect, not the product. It's just part of what signals to me that the festival engages with local music only enough to reach a bare-minimum obligation for rendering downtown into a commercialized cesspool.

Lolla went virtual this year, presenting a mix of rebroadcasted sets and new, prerecorded performances on its YouTube channel. It partnered with the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, which caught heat at the end of July after pulling a "Millennium Park at Home" concert by Chicago pop wizard Sen Morimoto; he refused to remove his introductory speech lightly criticizing mayor Lori Lightfoot for her failure to engage with protesters demanding police accountability. As Morimoto's scrapped performance made national news, DCASE and Lightfoot issued their own statement, claiming the music series intends to lift up local artists, but not "provide a platform for public discourse and debate." It followed their suggestion that both parties "honor artistic freedom and uphold free speech."

Less than a week later, Lolla announced its virtual festival. The official poster framed the lineup's encyclopedia of performers with a photo collage of the most famous names involved in the festivities and at least one fake progressive. Lori Lightfoot's face appeared on the left-hand side of the poster, right beneath an image of Chance the Rapper. The four-day digital bonanza began with a Zoom chat between Lightfoot and Lollapalooza mascot Perry Farrell.

What could the Jane's Addiction front man and the embattled mayor of Chicago possibly

talk about when politics weren't on the table? Well, the pandemic, which . . . is hardly apolitical. At the close of their discussion, Lightfoot asked Farrell to become a youth ambassador for the city's COVID-19 safety initiatives. I'm no teen, but I have a hard time believing any young person would be swayed to change their behaviors because a 61-year-old rocker asked them to at the behest of a mayor who routinely refuses to listen to their demands.

Not that Lightfoot's Lolla Zoom chat was about young people. It was a branding exercise intended to prop up the status quo during a summer when grassroots organizations encouraged Chicagoans to challenge the power structure. Lightfoot's interactions with music suggest she's only interested in it as far as it can serve as a vehicle for her message. Something tells me if she actually listened to what the artists on the Lolla lineup and in her backyard express in their work, she wouldn't like what she'd hear. —**LEOR GALIL**

Election

"This has truly restored faith in our democracy." I heard that over and over again, ringing out of newscasters' mouths and plastering social media once the veil started to lift on that sunny Saturday, days after voting ended, when it finally became clear that Joe Biden would be president. It sounded like sarcasm. How was any part of this election—this antiquated, confusing, and racist process for choosing which elderly white man controls our fate—genuinely productive and fair?

Did people suddenly forget the chaos, the insufferable debates? The way one side cheated without retribution, all the while making unsubstantiated claims about the other side? The endless pleas for people to register to vote (because for some reason that's not a given right), only to have those votes blatantly denied by the sitting president?

I don't want to diminish the triumphs of Kamala Harris, of Black organizers in the south, or of anyone else who put their entire weight behind removing Trump from office. But as so many took to the streets in celebration, I wasn't quite at the get-drunk-and-dance-in-my-Biden-Harris-merch level of excitement. And I'm still not. Like many others, mostly I just feel tired—and I know Black organizers who have been doing the work for decades feel utterly exhausted.

The same journalists touting "faith in democracy" had to then report on Trump's refusal to peacefully transition, and the shocking lack of systems in place to oust him. After years of a Trump administration, and months of campaigning, the public had to suffer through weeks of confusion, misinformation,

recounts, and lawsuits; a Biden win should not erase all of that.

In reality, this election did little but expose oppressive structures that have existed in this country since its inception. "Restored faith in democracy" feels like an insult to those who marched for weeks on end this summer, an insult to those who do the work every day of trying desperately to tell the world that democracy isn't the best way to move forward. It feels like a lulling return to complacency.

—**TARYN ALLEN**

Death

On a Wednesday night in July, long after our sense of normalcy had been annihilated, I went down the street to witness the last rites of an 84-year-old family member dying of coronavirus. I stood in the living room of her ranch house, between a couch and a bay window, with 15 others who were masked and a safe distance away. It was dim, I remember, as if lit by candles. She sat in a hospital bed in the center of the room.

The youngest watched through a cell phone camera. The oldest, her sprightly 88-year-old brother-in-law, said, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." We all waited for a miracle. For some, that meant the arrival of the priest. For others, including myself, it was for her immune system to kill what plagued her insides and for her to be better.

She had contracted the virus months before. We knew so little back then. How do we flatten the curve? Should we wear masks? It felt like her death happened fast, but looking back it was slow: a stroke, a positive test, a thrombectomy, a discharge, then a decline in health.

The priest was young. He stood next to her and spoke just above a whisper and with a pleasant accent. Though he had arrived in the dark, he had noticed the names of the streets on the corner on which she lived and said that in heaven she would enjoy wine in a beautiful field. It was thoughtful. She died a few days later.

Scenes much worse than this have taken place in so many hospitals and homes and screens. I have nothing profound to say about the virus, but I can tell you what an emergency room doctor, who on the day I write this is being vaccinated, told me. He said that as the pandemic stretches into another year and the death toll becomes even more abstract, it's easy to lose sight of how miraculous it is that we are here. The odds of designing a vaccine this effective and this fast, he said, "is like drunkenly stumbling out of your apartment in a snowstorm and finding a lottery ticket worth \$70 million." —**SUJAY KUMAR** 

Ring in the New Year on the Right "Paw"



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There will be a doctor in the White House. 🇺🇸

COURTESY OF THE BIDEN TRANSITION TEAM/@DRBIDEN

Northwestern had more tolerance for provocation than it does now. A day after the *WSJ* essay was published, NU issued an official distancing statement, declaring that “Joseph Epstein has not been a lecturer at Northwestern since 2003,” and that the university “strongly disagrees with Mr. Epstein’s misogynistic views.”

The English department, in which he taught for so long, was moved to issue its own statement, rejecting Epstein’s “unmerited aspersion” on Biden’s “rightful claiming of her doctoral credentials,” and describing him as “a former adjunct lecturer who has not taught here in nearly 20 years.”

Then they wiped him off their online list of emeritus faculty.

So long, 2020

In the two short months last winter before the virus hit, I saw three operas and wrote about them for the *Reader*: *Madama Butterfly* and *The Queen of Spades* at Lyric Opera, and Dan Shore’s *Freedom Ride*, a Chicago Opera Theater presentation at the Studebaker. I’ve always known that it’s a privilege to have a seat at the opera, but now, looking back at those productions through the long tunnel of the virus shutdown, they shimmer—alive with sound and presence. We didn’t pay attention then—in the moment, we hardly ever do—but it was a golden time.

In the 1990s, Sarah Bryan Miller (or Bryan Miller, as she was known then), often had the *Reader* seat at classical concerts. A member of the Lyric Opera Chorus, and an alum of Lyric’s young-artist training program, she had a professional’s deep knowledge of the music, a discerning ear, wide-ranging interests, and—when she wanted it—a wicked pen. She went on to become the much-loved classical music critic for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and is among the many people we lost this year. On November 28, Miller died of cancer she’d been fighting for a decade. The *Reader* archive is fortunate to have a trove of more than 100 of her memorable pieces on music and more.

Wishing you a healthy new year; hoping we’ll soon be back at the opera, theater, galleries, museums, shops, restaurants, and venues of all kinds that make Chicago so great. 📺

🐦 @Deannalsaacs

CULTURE

The gremlin and the EdD

She earned the title—still he was dissing her! Would he do the same to, say, Dr. Kissinger?

By DEANNA ISAACS

Two weeks before Christmas
In a treacherous year
With POTUS and virus
When who should appear
But a tiny old gremlin
Named Joseph Epstein
Who bullied Jill Biden
Just to be mean.
‘Don’t call yourself Doc’
The gremlin did bray

Putting her down
In the *WSJ*...
Forgive me. Too much time in my own
company, desperate for amusement. And this
was definitely amusing—Epstein, popping up
out of the slow gray end to this nasty year to
call out our soon-to-be First Lady. For what?
/ Being uncool / Revealing himself / As the
much greater fool.
OK, I’m stopping now.

Jill Biden earned a doctorate in education; Epstein earned no advanced degree, but saw fit, in a December 11 *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece, to let her know that “A wise man once said that no one should call *himself* ‘Dr.’ unless *he* has delivered a child [italics mine].” Sage advice that neatly eliminates anyone who has actually delivered a child, by, you know, bearing it. Which Biden has also done.

Epstein, who wrote a whole book on snobbery, attempted to demean Biden’s community college research and career, while noting that he taught at Northwestern University for 30 years without anything more than a University of Chicago B.A. The latter part’s true: I remember the consternation among graduate students there when Northwestern hired him, in the 1970s, on the heels of another notorious essay, this one in *Harper’s Magazine*, in which he opined that homosexuality is a curse that causes such pain, it would be better wiped “off the face of the earth.”



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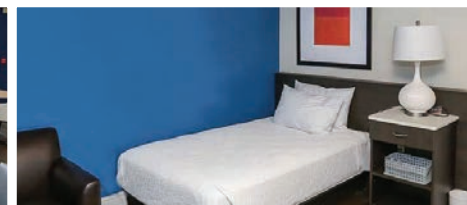


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Year in Review | Arts & Culture

ACTIVISM

Changemakers of 2020—and beyond

Whether through organizing, the arts, or social media, these individuals took the year by the horns and made their mark on Chicago—and the world.

By **GRETCHEN STERBA**

Say what you will about 2020, but it was a year for people in Chicago to make their own agendas and to control their own destinies. Chicago organizers took action not just for themselves, but for young people growing up in the city, especially in Black and Brown neighborhoods. In the face of adversity, these folks who call the Windy City home got to work in times of crisis, and their work hasn't gone unnoticed. Here are 11 people who gave a damn in 2020; and they're nowhere close to stopping any time soon.

Eva Maria Lewis

Executive Director of Free Root Operation/artist

For South Shore native Eva Maria Lewis, traveling to and from the north side for a quality education exposed the disparities between white and Black students in Chicago. In 2015, she founded Free Root Operation, an organization fighting gun violence through compassion and opportunity, and this year Lewis developed programming for Bouchet Elementary, located in South Shore, to introduce peace rooms, a place for students to decompress, stretch, or relax as an alternative to punishment, to foster social-emotional learning. She plans to expand these efforts to more under-resourced schools in 2021. "I allow myself to imagine, 'OK, we've never had something like this, [but] it doesn't mean it can't happen.' What do you need to do to get there? There's so much being accomplished, it's here to stay. It's just going to get better."

Laundi Keepseagle

Executive Director at Save Money, Save Life

In 2016, Laundi Keepseagle, a Standing Rock

Reservation native, met rapper Vic Mensa at the No DAPA protests, where they discussed sustainable change that would be grounded in community and safety for Black and Brown youth. Two years later, Save Money, Save Life was born. SMSL's mission is to use art, education, entertainment, and projects to foster and empower BIPOC folks, whether it be training street medics volunteers to aid gun violence or hold drives for back-to-school aid initiatives. Over the course of this year, the organization pivoted from their regular programming and helped distribute 100,000 pounds of food across the city, raised funds and awareness for homeless youth during a sleepout, and took to the streets to protest for George Floyd and Black lives. Keepseagle has, among other youth programs, a Black and Indigenous teen exchange program in the works for Summer 2021. "Living on a reservation, I didn't really understand the rest of the world, which limited possibilities for myself, and I know a lot of people from the city also experience that. We live within these borders and don't understand the rest of the world."

Nash Alam

Digital Organizer at Grassroots Collaborative

Nash Alam used to not believe in "Slacktivists," performative activism a la social media, but as someone who has been both rooted on the ground and behind the screen, Alam highlights the need for both roles. "I'm constantly thinking about what it is that young Black and Brown people really care about." As the face behind the socials for Grassroots Collaborative, a community-labor coalition, Alam shares content consisting of memes, infographics, and illustrations that



Arts & Culture | *Year in Review*

Free Root Operation founder Eva Maria Lewis

JEFF MARINI FOR CHICAGO READER

provides information and resources relating to racial justice and economic equity. During the summer, Alam trained the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council's youth group, and with the police brutality uprising, "absorbed the momentum" and wrote scripted e-mails for citizens to send out to the city council and other representatives. Going forward, Alam's work will continue the fight to push city council to enact progressive revenue options. "Jeff Bezos made billions in the first three months of the pandemic and the media was talking about looting. It's about fighting that narrative consistently to really uplift the struggles that the working people of Chicago are facing, and policing as a root cause of violence."

Ric Wilson

Musician/activist

Sitting comfortably at more than 800,000 Spotify streams, Ric Wilson's uprising-antem of the summer, "Fight like Ida B. and Marsha P.," combines a disco tempo accompanied by odes to Black freedom fighters with solidarity with marginalized communities. "I wanted to make a song about folks who I felt like really had super duper huge courage to do the things they were doing at the time they were doing it." The same week the song was released, Wilson doubled down on his lyrics, "The liberation of black trans women leads to the liberation of all black people / this isn't an option," which Twitter itself turned into a billboard, placed on 15th and Ashland, and per Wilson's request, had the company send the \$5,000 revenue to Brave Space Alliance,

a Chicago-based Black, trans-led LGBTQ+ center providing affirming services on the west and south sides. Wilson's funk-infused rap resonating with so many fans over the summer suggests there could be more of a balance in the world of activism, centering the love of people over money. "People say artists should be a reflection of the times."

Rivka Yeker & Morgan Martinez

Founders of Hooligan Magazine

For more than six years, independent publication *Hooligan Magazine*, founded by best friends Rivka Yeker and Morgan Martinez, has always centered BIPOC voices, but this year, Martinez says, "forced us to experiment with the way we approach interacting with our readership and community." For instance, she and Yeker crafted *Hooligan Hangouts*, an Instagram Live show where folks could virtually enjoy live performers or be led through a healing session with artistic cooperatives like the Black, trans-led organization Activation Residency. "We have this future that we're committed to make sure we can still produce content that's valuable because I really do believe popular media is never going to give information you actually need," Yeker says.

Maira Khwaja & Trina Reynolds-Tyler

Founders of TM Productions

Work partners Maira Khwaja and Trina Reynolds-Tyler met while working at south side-based journalism company the Invisible Institute, where the two continue to work, but wanted to produce content surrounding the importance of elections designed for young people. They started off with original multi-

media content to combat misinformation on social media, but further continued this with their strategic communications-based company TM Productions to make legal and political information more accessible to Black and Brown people. In addition, this year, the duo decided to run for local school council—and won (Khwaja in Hyde Park, Reynolds-Tyler in South Shore). Khwaja and Reynolds-Tyler also built up "an ecosystem of mutual aid," which Khwaja says is "a form of direct action," with Reynolds-Tyler distributing food for south siders with The People's Grab 'N Go and Khwaja with Market Box, a collaboration with Star Farm Chicago to ensure food security for the west and south sides. "We fit so well together," Reynolds-Tyler says. "The work that we do creates an impact on people's lives: people who are not on the Internet, people who don't have access to fresh produce, people who are, in many ways, the forgotten people." As for the new year ahead, Khwaja is hopeful. "2021 will be about leveraging and strengthening so we can continue to generate that power."

Pidgeon Pagonis

Intersex activist/writer

Pidgeon Pagonis found out they were intersex after retrieving their medical records at 18 during their freshman year at DePaul University, and thus the journey toward ending the unnecessary medical procedures began. At the time, Lurie's Children's Hospital, where Pagonis was harmed at birth in the late 80s, was across the street. This past July, with the unstoppable work by the Intersex Justice Project, cofounded by Pagonis, Lurie's released a statement acknowledging the harm done to patients and is making conscious

efforts to end intersex surgeries. "A lot of us who are in a social movement come from a place of oppression or trauma," Pagonis says. "When you grow up different [in a way] that's so foundational to society [like] the [gender] binary, you feel like you'll never be loved as you are." Now at 34, Pagonis is focusing on writing their memoir coming out in fall 2021 and plans on taking steps toward restorative, healing practices, citing, "Activism can be an addiction."

Damon Williams and Jennifer Pagán

Cofounders of the Let Us Breathe Collective

If there was a power couple of the Black Liberation Movement in Chicago, it would be cofounders Damon Williams and Jennifer Pagán of the Black-led healing through arts and organizing #LetUsBreathe Collective. During the uprising protests this summer, Williams, also the cohost of Chicago favorite AirGo Radio, and Pagán, a cultural worker and educator, were attacked and arrested by the Chicago Police Department during a Black Lives Matter protest. Reflecting on the incident six months later, Pagán says the events over the summer have been a "transformative experience." "I feel more grounded in what has come of it," she says. And what has come of it was building the Black Abolitionist Network, which ran the campaign for #DefundCPD. "What's really frustrating is that we're not saying anything new," Williams says. "We've been saying it for five years [but] we just now had the momentum. It pushed us to be what we've been naming, to go back to this point of radical imagination. We've been summoning thousands of people demanding this, and we didn't even have to talk to them directly for its manifest." ■



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Year in Review | Arts & Culture



LIT

The ten best Chicago books of 2020

Add these stories rooted in the city to your reading list.

By ADAM MORGAN

Canceled events, publishing delays, shuttered bookstores—in many ways, 2020 was an awful year for Chicago writers. But it was a fantastic year for Chicago readers, at least when it comes to new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. To keep this list manageable, I've limited it to books with a strong emphasis on the city itself. That means you won't see books set elsewhere, like Natasha Trethewey's *Memorial Drive* and Kathleen Rooney's *Cher Ami and Major Whittlesey*, nor books with broader subject matter, like Mikki

Kendall's *Hood Feminism*. Nonetheless, here are my favorite Chicago-focused books of 2020, available at an independent bookstore near you.

***Everywhere You Don't Belong* by Gabriel Bump** (Algonquin Books)

"I remember Euclid Avenue," begins Gabriel Bump's debut novel, set in the South Shore neighborhood where he grew up. Bump's narrator, Claude McKay Love, is an anxious

kid who struggles to fit in. When social unrest erupts after police kill one of his neighbors, Claude takes the Megabus to the University of Missouri, where white students ask if he knows Chief Keef. The winner of this year's Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence, it's a spectacular coming-of-age story with the rare ability to make you smile and rip out your heart on the same page.

***The Beauty of Your Face* by Sahar Mustafah** (W. W. Norton)

Mustafah's debut novel opens with a school shooting at a Muslim school for girls just south of Chicago. As gunshots shake the ceiling of her office, the Palestinian-American school principal, Afaf Rahman, remembers her life growing up in the city, including the disappearance of her sister and the unraveling of her family. A harrowing work of insightful fiction, it absolutely earned its spot in this year's *New York Times's* 100 Notable Books.

***Finna* by Nate Marshall** (One World)

Marshall moved to Colorado last year, but his latest poetry collection is still grounded in Chicago, "a town in love with its own blood, / a blood browned on its own history & funk." *Finna* opens with a stunning series of poems about Marshall's online interactions with a white supremacist who shares his name, but my personal favorite, "when i say Chicago," is a soaring ode to the city that's worth framing on your wall.

***Too Much Midnight* by Krista Franklin** (Haymarket Books)

Too Much Midnight is a miracle of a book that spans centuries and continents and worlds. The accompanying essays about Franklin's work—from Jamila Woods, Cauleen Smith, Greg Tate, and Maria Hamilton Abegunde—make this a Chicago book, since she's one of our most remarkable living artists. A brilliant

Year in Review

synthesis of poetry and art, Afrofuturism and Afrosurrealism, pop culture and actual history, *Too Much Midnight* won the 2020 Chicago Review of Books award for poetry. (Disclosure: I founded the Chicago Review of Books five years ago and still serve as one of the awards judges.)

***A Most Beautiful Thing: The True Story of America's First All-Black High School Rowing Team* by Arshay Cooper** (Flatiron Books)

Cooper's 2015 memoir was republished this year to coincide with the release of a documentary film based on his story. Back in 1997 in East Garfield Park, Cooper and his Manley Career Academy classmates overcame rival gang affiliations to form the first all-Black high school rowing team. This isn't your average sports memoir about hard-fought championships; it's an intimate and inspiring look at race, privilege, and the bonds formed by shared traumas—and shared boats.

***The Heart of a Woman: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price* by Rae Linda Brown** (University of Illinois Press)

In 1933, when the Chicago Symphony Orchestra played Florence Price's Symphony in E minor, she became the first African American woman in history to compose music for a major orchestra. Despite her influential career, most of Price's work was lost until 2009, when her scores were discovered in an abandoned house in Kankakee County. Brown's book is the first-ever biography of Price, who spent the second half of her life in Chicago after her family left Arkansas during the Great Migration.

***Statelyway's Garden* by Jasmon Drain** (Random House)

"We lived in the biggest concrete building on Chicago's South Side," says a character in Drain's piercing collection of linked stories set in and around Statelyway Gardens in Bronzeville, a massive public housing development (where Drain lived himself) that was demolished in 2009. "We'd move before they tore down our buildings and took my views of Chinatown and Comiskey . . . to make new condos," the same character remembers. This is an achingly beautiful book that, like Dybek's *The Coast of*

Chicago, will make you mourn all the past versions of the city we've lost.

***The Lost Book of Adana Moreau* by Michael Zapata** (Hanover Square Press)

In 1929, a Dominican immigrant in New Orleans publishes a science fiction novel that becomes a classic. But on her deathbed, she asks her son to destroy the manuscript for her second novel. Nearly 100 years later in Chicago, a man named Saul Drower receives a package containing that very manuscript, and sets out to solve a century-old mystery. Zapata's debut is an utterly fascinating literary adventure for fans of *2666* and *Lovecraft Country* that won this year's Chicago Review of Books award for fiction.

***Campus Counterspaces: Black and Latinx Students' Search for Community at Historically White Universities* by Micere Keels** (Cornell University Press)

A professor of comparative human development at the University of Chicago, Dr. Keels interviewed more than 500 Black and Latinx students who enrolled at five predominantly white colleges in and around Chicago. What she found was that "these students were asking for access to counterspaces—safe spaces that simultaneously validate and critique one's interconnected self and group identity—that would enable radical growth." It's a fascinating look at why most university diversity policies still fall far short of meaningful, institutional change.

***Sun Ra's Chicago: Afrofuturism and the City* by William Sites** (University of Chicago Press)

Plenty of books have been written about Afrofuturist pioneer Sun Ra and his Arkestra, but Sites is the first to make Chicago his co-protagonist. "How did Sun Ra's own music and cosmology emerge? And why did they flourish in Chicago?" Sites asks. Beginning in 1946 when Herman Poole Blount arrived on the south side until he left for New York in 1961, Sites provides crucial context on how Chicago's Afrocentrist philosophy, religion, and jazz scenes helped turn Blount into Sun Ra. 

 @adammorgan

BULL HORN



PHOTO COURTESY Shabazz Palaces, still from "Are You... Can You... Were You? (Felt)." 2012. HD video. 5 min 54 sec.

Can we just feel for a while?

zakkiyyah najeebah dumas-o'neal

*It's a feeling.
I woke up to it, heavy,
alight with trueness
Always a way of losin',
compelled to knew it
My body traveled,
my mind waits behind the music
My crime bemuses,
"relax inside my shiny blueness."
Time: I understand it,
but I never choose it
I can't explain it with verbs,
I have to do it.*

My year, live from this pandemic, in words, would have to be these lyrics from Shabazz Palace's 2011 song (which sounds more timely and pertinent than ever) "Are You...Can You...Were You? (Felt)" from their futuristic and speculative but deeply introspective album *Black Up*.

It's the "relax inside my blueness" for me.

It's also the "I can't explain it with verbs, I have to do it" for me, too.

I've been looking towards surrealism, speculative ways of thinking, and jazz to feel less anxious, to feel more human. We're living in a moment where corporations, institutions, brands, and other entities all want in

on "Blackness," as a means of "showing solidarity" and flaunting how "inclusive" they're becoming. Outside of the vortex of Black political grievances, this past summer's uprisings, and COVID-19—What does it mean for the Black artist to be encouraged to pull inward, process, and just—feel? Black artists have always been encouraged and pressured to politicize their creative outputs, and to respond to the various forms of societal and racial trauma we're often subjected to. Can we imagine a time, space, and place for supporting Black artists and Black creativity right now through what we're feeling, and not what it is we're making/producing? Or how it contributes to conversations on race? Even in a pandemic, and amongst the anti-Black political tensions—Black artists are deserving of care, relief, dreaming, timelessness, absurdity, and pure forms of being not always encapsulated by trauma and those who can benefit from it.

What does it mean to nurture the Black artist from this space? To support us in the doing and the process, and not the results of our making? To be supported in our thinking—to be supported simply in how we're feeling—and dreaming.

zakkiyyah is a multidisciplinary artist, arts educator, and independent curator working in Chicago. She can be found here: zakkiyyahnajeebah.com and @zakkiyyah.najeebah on Instagram.

Bull Horn is an avenue to give wings to the stories that matter most. This series, from Red Bull in partnership with the Chicago Reader, will invite guest writers, artists, activists, and community members to share their ideas and amplify timely, crucial topics they feel are important now.



Year in Review | Arts & Culture



Comedian Alex Collyard (left) and burlesque performer Iridessence went viral in 2020. TIKTOK

THE INTERNET

The year of TikTok

How local creatives made the most of the social media platform

By BRIANNA WELLEN

During a year when screen time has felt more like a punishment than a reward and the word “viral” has taken on a completely different meaning, one social media platform has stood out from the rest and in many ways defined 2020: TikTok. Its continuing popularity is likely due in part to the creatives who flocked to the app when traditional venues were shuttered in the midst of the pandemic.

“Ultimately being able to create something good out there and have people respond to it, big or small, has been really important to kind of replace live performance for me,” says comedian Alex Collyard (@alexcollyard). He first started experimenting with TikTok in the summer of 2019 as part of a challenge with some fellow comedians to see who could get

to 100 followers. He won “handily,” he says, and has since become something of a TikTok star, especially in recent months when his videos started focusing on the laugh-worthy nuances of the election and U.S. politics in general.

“I would say my most successful videos were just me using that ability to just kind of improvise with myself,” Collyard says. “Not that they’re like, you know, super like improv-y, but like, they have like a natural conversational feel. I’m literally like recording and then, you know, a second later recording my response to what I just said. And in a way, I kind of actually like to emotionally respond to myself.”

“It’s basically an app for theater kids, where theater kids want to be,” says Eliza-

beth Gomez (@juannarumbel), a comedian and storyteller who initially discovered TikTok through her cosplaying teen. “What really kept me going was the diversity; there were people from all sorts of ages, people from all sorts of backgrounds, religious, ethnic, and I don’t have that kind of access with Instagram or Facebook.”

Gomez, also one of the founding members of the Windy City Rollers, put on her skates for the first time in years, and combined roller skating (an activity that was trending on TikTok early in the pandemic), comedy, and her extensive wig collection to bring joy to herself and her friends. Something struck a chord beyond that, and soon her videos were hitting thousands of views, her most-watched clip with more than 500,000. And along the way she’s discovered a new way to hone and present her craft.

“At this point, I feel like this is my performance,” Gomez says. “I have a lot of fun doing it, I can do it on my own time, I’m not at a bar getting drunk till two o’clock in the morning and eating way too many chicken wings. I’m 46 at this point so it fits my lifestyle, it fits my abilities.”

And it’s not just the flexibility to create where and when you want, something that was not always possible in the pro-hustling culture of in-person performances that permeated the before times. TikTok, it seems, has an audience for everyone. Instead of hoping someone in a small Chicago venue appreciates a performance, artists are able to reach people from anywhere who are often searching for a specific theme, ideal, or type of creator.

“I think TikTok and Instagram fill the void of just needing to be seen, seen on my own terms, and [I’m] able to curate that,” says burlesque performer Iridessence (@iridessence_) who has grown an audience with her cottage core posts and glamorous, sometimes very elaborate looks—in one video she dresses in full Marie Antoinette garb to take out the trash. “Unfortunately due to being a person of color and size, in person I can be very invisible unless I go out of my way to be over the top. The Internet can connect you to strangers across the world who understand what it means to be invisible even if you’re not fancy.”

Because TikTok has such a diverse audience, there’s no telling what will hit when.

There’s no magic formula to follow—in fact, most folks I spoke with say that when they were creating just to try something new and entertain themselves, that’s when things really took off. Drag queen and comedian Derry Queen (@derryqueenahaha) discovered that with a video called “Questions At The Gates Of Hell,” which she has since turned into a popular series.

“I think it was my third or fourth video that went viral—it’s at 3.1 million views, which is just the stupidest thing that’s ever happened,” Derry Queen says. “It’s been a good outlet to challenge myself into not only coming up with drag looks and things like that, but to bring my comedy into this one-minute avenue.”

Once you’ve gone viral, though, it becomes impossible to not want to chase that high, something that TikTok hasn’t always made easy. For one, the trends and sounds used in videos are rapidly changing, burying older videos that don’t use the right hashtag or popular song of the moment. In December of last year, TikTok admitted that it was suppressing the outreach of queer, fat, and disabled creators because they were “vulnerable to cyberbullying.” And censorship is alive and well.

“I’ve only posted like 25 TikToks and like out of the 25 I probably had like eight of them taken down,” Derry Queen says. “One time I had a TikTok taken down for saying I had 17 butt cheeks, which makes no sense. They said it was a medical lie or something like that. I’ve had a lot of censorship, but there is safety for that reason where it’s like there are a bunch of tiny kids on the other side.”

Even with all TikTok’s problems, these artists aren’t planning on leaving the platform any time soon. Even as performance venues begin to open up, it remains as a place for experimenting and building an even larger audience. And not just an audience, but a community of fans who are more often than not supportive and refreshingly wholesome.

“It’s ultimately the Internet, so there are trolls,” Iridessence says. “But for the most part, like romantic compliments are still very tasteful, you know, like I get a lot of comments from people like, ‘Can we like, move into a cottage together, I want to walk with you and hold your hand,’ so precious. I’ve been lucky enough to be able to mostly carve out my own positive audience of people who really appreciate what I do.”

@BriannaWellen

Theater | *Year in Review*



MOVEMENT AND MUTUAL AID

‘Let us continue’

In a year of loss, we found that dance is everywhere.

By IRENE HSIAO

The view is divided by screens and mirrors in Jane Jerardi’s *delicate hold*. Fragmentation by the frame creates incomplete views of arms and torsos, close and deliberate. You hear the squeak of the pencil, the rustle of paper—a voiceover, separated from the person dancing in the grass, says, “How can I expand my box?”

A circle of wooden flats on the northwest side of the parking lot behind the Harold Washington Cultural Center in Bronzeville, where a flurry of flying feet makes intricate music in coordinated turns. After the tap jam, Bril Barrett takes you upstairs where even the walls of M.A.D.D. Rhythms’ home speak of resistance and joy in a visual history of tap dance.

A splash of water hits the window in *The Sky Was Different*, blurring the world outside, but the man inside does not flinch or get wet.

The nearness, the pulse, the sense of living breath in a magnified perspective on Ayako Kato’s articulate feet at Links Hall, the gaze floor-level, the view infinite. *Just Being*.

Kato again, teaching a Muppet-esque puppet how to say “excuse me” in Japanese, Spence Warren speaking poetry on the street, a remarkably present duet with Nora Sharp

bridging Brooklyn and Chicago at Links Hall’s 96 Hours Festival.

Instagram Live and Zoom classes (many free, low cost, or by donation) by Lucky Plush’s Virtual Dance Lab, Common Conservatory, Aerial Dance Chicago, Chicago Movement Collective, Hubbard Street, Visceral, Deeply Rooted, Columbia College’s Dance Buffet, Ishti, individuals, everyone.

This is a year of the body, the breadth and confines of which have been defined in ways that contract beneath and expand beyond the skin. Breath is a boundary we cannot see, a risk we can’t forego, a danger and a comfort and a need. Our faces and hands are costumed in armor that limits the expression of our mouths and opposable thumbs, perhaps, but at least we have our brows and eyelashes, our spines and toes, our shadows and silhouettes.

This is a year of the screen, the pixel, the handheld, the hybrid dimensional, the technological, the small, the flat, the gargantuan, the optionally scaled, the incomplete, the modified, the optimized, the superimposed, the computer-generated, that reveal and conceal and control and invent an unexperienced present shared in an asynchronous future, dependent

Keisha Janae in *delicate hold* 📷 COURTESY JANE JERARDI

on the fickle whims of WiFi.

This is a year of the home: refuge, workplace, prison. More passes with the vacuum than you thought possible. Those same drapes again. The subtle variations to the view suddenly altered by the unsuited interjections of Chicago’s infinite seasons. The awareness that walls are only an illusion against an unprecedented onslaught of fireworks in the alien quiet of quarantine. (Dude shouting “Claudia!” in the street at night: Claudia does not want to speak to you.) Neighbors putting paper dolls and stuffed animals and handprints and rainbows in the windows. Neighbors’ kids doing backyard boogies in the year of the inflatable kiddie pool.

This is a year of loss.

This is a year of movement, the momentum of which stems from points tipped years or decades before, a long arc we hope bends towards justice, the curve of which we all ride, and which one might microinfinitesimally weigh down with the force of a foot at a time stepping down to march. Bodies and voices in the streets. Together. Apart. Are you here to protest and/or demonstrate and/or dance?

This is a year of mutual aid, of community gardens and food pantries and checking in and taking care.

This is a year of essential workers, who carry our bodies on their backs.

This is a year of postponement, deferral, delay, and cancellation, of force majeure, of “acts of God,” which is what we say when we really mean the negligence of mankind, bad government, capitalism, and misunderstood Darwinism.

This is a year of small comforts: warm tea, hot baths, houseplants, sunlight.

This is a year of the technician, the magician who mediates the hand of the choreographer and the eye and ear of the viewer. This is the year where media stood in for matter, molded matter into new forms, made things matter, or at least marked time.

This is a year of reimagining gathering: face in one place, feet in another. The kitchen as studio. The living room as studio. The park as studio. You can study anywhere! And yet many still sought the company of dancing together—in shared time if not shared space.

This is a year of rethinking production, with presenters becoming video producers and livestream experts. Links Hall beefed up their equipment, partnered performers with technicians to develop new works, and began

preparing for the post-pandemic possibility of hybrid audiences, part on-site, part on stream. The Dance Center at Columbia College thought holistically, presenting performances alongside discussions and workshops.

This is a year of reconceiving the difference between near and far, then and now, self and other, ritual, repetition, improvisation, invention.

Words and Shout-outs from Others:

“I was grateful to slow down. To be with my anxiety. To find pleasure in timeless being-on-the-floor explorations. To be humble in my privilege and commit to taking action where needed against racism and oppression in the many concentric circles of my community. I hope these changes will sustain and grow in 2021. I will continue to ask how can I serve.”—Kristina Fluty

“[Technicians] Giau Minh Truong and Jacob Snodgrass for getting artists online . . . Experimental Sound Studio for launching Quarantine Concerts”—Jane Jerardi

“Anyone who made a dance or a dance film or developed special dance events online or released an older work remade for the pandemic”—Winifred Haun

“World Refugee Day Chicago 2020 . . . was a pretty epic citywide and international collaboration this year.”—Shawn Lent

“Anyone who kept people dancing all year at home, in parks, in class, in virtual workshops!—kept spirits up, offered a movement practice, a processing, a regular place and ‘space’ to be with, without any product or goals.”—Erin Kilmurray

“All the teachers who taught class remotely or in person with masks or both at the same time. All the students who kept going. Anyone who tried something new.”—Ellen Chenoweth

Some Observations:

Knitting is dance.

Kneading is dance.

Baking is dance.

Breathing is dance.

Growing a garden is dance.

Building a union is dance.

Feeding the hungry is dance.

Action is dance. So is stillness. So is rest.

Let us continue. 📷

🐦 @IreneCHsiao

Year in Review | Theater



A ghost light onstage at the Auditorium Theatre
© MATTHEW GILSON FOR CHICAGO READER

NOTHING NEXT TO NORMAL

Stages of a pandemic

Chicago theater artists rose to challenges—and created new ones—in 2020.

By **KERRY REID**

On Monday, March 16, I walked into a theater for the last time in 2020. It was at Theater Wit for their production of Mike Lew's *Teenage Dick*, a *Richard III*-meets-high-school-angst dark comedy-drama. The show was supposed to have a regular run but then . . . well, you know.

Theater Wit taped that one live performance and then made it available for purchase as a streaming show—the first of many that rolled out in the aftermath of the COVID-19 shutdown. I saw the streaming premiere a few days after the live performance, and at the Zoom talkback (there's a phrase I wouldn't have known a year ago!), director Brian Balcom pointed out that making a show about a teen with a disability (Richard was played by MacGregor Arney, who has cerebral palsy) available online meant that people with disabilities who can't always easily attend theater could actually see it.

That silver-lining message was one that I've carried in the back of my mind throughout this godawful year, even as the new vaccines make it more likely that some semblance of live performance will return in 2021. It's not enough to get back to "normal" (whatever that means). Because for too many theatermakers, "normal" was never good enough. In fact, "normal" just plain sucked. "Normal" reflected too many of the worst aspects of the American narrative, onstage and off: greed, racism, classism, and ineffective and/or hostile reactions to complaints about working conditions. Just for starters.

The biggest reminder of that came with the release of the BIPOC Demands for White American Theatre from We See You W.A.T. Page after page of this document, developed collaboratively by artists across the country and throughout every discipline in the industry, laid out in both large scope and granular

detail what needs to happen for American theaters to actually embody the pious messages of diversity and community puffing up their mission statements. It's both a blueprint and a battle cry, and one that should reshape the way a lot of institutions think about "business as usual" going forward.

Locally and nationally, many theaters changed the names at the top of the organizational chart. Throughout the summer, Chicago theaters rolled out press releases announcing new Black leadership. But Donterrio Johnson, named as artistic director at PrideArts (formerly Pride Films and Plays) in the aftermath of social media allegations against founder David Zak, left after only a few months, asserting that Zak was still very involved behind the scenes. We still don't know who will end up in charge at Victory Gardens, which faced backlash from theater artists over the selection of Erica Daniels to replace Chay Yew.

And while several of the artists named to leadership roles have long roots with the companies they're now running, Johnson's experience suggests that it's not enough to change the names. Boards have to make the commitment to supporting new leaders as they reimagine the mission and the work from the ground up. And as UrbanTheater's Miranda Gonzalez reminded us, it's also important to support the theaters that have been making work by and for marginalized communities for years.

It's not lost on me that these changes at the top around the country are happening just as the theatrical environment is entering the choppiest waters it's faced in decades. (I'm reminded of the *Onion* headline right after the election of Barack Obama in 2008: "Black Man Given Nation's Worst Job.") Second City's longtime owner, CEO, and executive producer Andrew Alexander stepped down as long-repeated stories about institutional racism at the comedy factory gained fresh attention during the protests over police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many others. Anthony LeBlanc stepped in as interim executive producer, and this month Jon Carr, a veteran of Atlanta's improv scene, takes over permanently. But the company is also on the market, and as the permanent closing of iO illustrates, commercial theatrical enterprises (even those with wealthy and

famous alums galore) are facing tough times.

Some wounds are self-inflicted. (I've been trying to catch up with the fuckery going on at New York's Flea Theater and . . . whew. How do you spend \$25 million on a new building and expect artists to work for free? AMERICA!) In other cases, theaters are taking advantage of the downtime to rethink their need for having a permanent space, as with Prop Thttr's decision to give up their Avondale venue. If it's a choice between investing in buildings or investing in the work, then putting the work (more accurately, the people who create the work) first makes the most sense.

I can't pretend to know what kind of shows we'll see onstage in the year ahead. It seems unlikely that theaters will give up their digital components—and as Balcom's comment reminds us, there are good reasons to further develop those programming elements in order to expand accessibility.

Theaters can't ignore budget restrictions. Yet if they think too small and safe, they won't necessarily win back the live audiences they need who have become more comfortable seeing shows online. There is a difference between screen and stage, and leaning into what makes theater thrilling and immediate and intimate is the best argument theaters can offer for supporting live performance.

The most stirring and haunting show I saw this past year before COVID killed in-person theater was TimeLine's *Kill Move Paradise* by James Ijames, directed by Wardell Julius Clark, which set victims of police killings in a kind of limbo where they confronted each other and the audience. One of the characters asks his comrade what these people who "like to watch" are called. "America," comes the response.

We need to stop being passive observers when it comes to politics and art. Whether we're able to go to physical venues or are watching new plays online, we need to stop thinking of artists as plucky little hobbyists doing what they love for our enjoyment and distraction. They are central to the economic fabric of our communities. There will be a lot of demands on the new Congress and administration to provide relief for a lot of industries battered by the COVID shutdowns. We should all be pushing to make sure that artists, who have given us succor in this Worst of All Possible Years, are treated with respect, dignity, and economic justice. 

 @kerryreid

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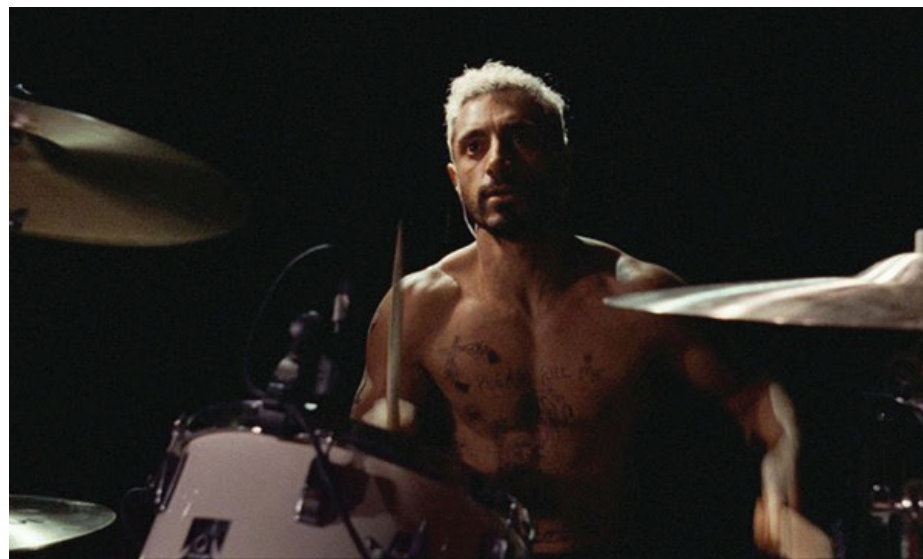
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Year in Review | Film



TOP 20

Relive the year in film with these double features

Some of the best films of the year meet their matches.

By **BECCA JAMES**

As 2020 comes to a close, it brings with it the gift of hindsight, which I have decided to use to play cinematic matchmaker—instead of recommending merely ten movies, here are 20. Pairing some of the best releases of the year together via a list of double-features allows us to reflect on how 2020 left its mark on the medium. It's admittedly heavy on the horror—that's fitting, though, in a year that saw its own share of scares, but also saw the genre strive as streaming replaced a trip to the theaters. And while we would have loved to see these on the big screen, as movies found their way into our homes it's nice to think it made for not an isolating experience, but an intimate one.

***The Assistant* (Dir. Kitty Green) + *Sound of Metal* (Dir. Darius Marder)**

The Assistant, released in January, and *Sound of Metal*, released in December, act as inter-

esting bookends to a year that began like any other before quickly resembling none other. Pushed inside because of the pandemic, life became more insular. Or did it? Take *The Assistant*, which sees Jane (Julia Garner), who, while not confined to her home, spends nearly all her time in one place: the office. Sound familiar? Her job is her entire world save a single phone call to her family. Quiet anger hums through the sonically subdued film as Jane struggles in a toxic work environment. Similarly, *Sound of Metal*, another purposely quiet film, follows Ruben's (Riz Ahmed) initially isolating journey from a tight-knit metal scene to a rural community for recovering addicts who are deaf, after he loses his hearing. What he longs for most is for things to return to normal (again, sound familiar?), but in the film, as in life, that's not possible. Fittingly, both characters are left in a state of authentic ambiguity. Watch these as a meditation on the passing of

time, the many faces of staying in place, and the pursuit of happier and healthier endeavors in the new year.

***Gretel & Hansel* (Dir. Oz Perkins) + *Shirley* (Dir. Josephine Decker)**

This is a fever-dream double feature, as both films freshly stylize familiar tales of terror. *Gretel & Hansel* is a female-first title because it fleshes out Gretel's (Sophia Lillis) character by making her a natural witch. She has to reconcile this innate gift in this visually gruesome and beautiful bildungsroman that gives the classic story new life. Meanwhile, *Shirley* is a look at the very morose Shirley Jackson (Elisabeth Moss), presented in a way that mimics the famed fiction author's horror writing. Covered in the same heady haze, watch these when you want to take a trip without leaving your couch.

***Come to Daddy* (Dir. Ant Timpson) + *Blow the Man Down* (Dir. Bridget Savage Cole and Danielle Krudy)**

Brutal violence abounds in these coastal mysteries, but they're not all show. While *Come to Daddy* leans more toward horror and *Blow the Man Down* toward drama, both have a dark comedic undertow that pulls viewers into their provocative talking points. In the former, Norval Greenwood (Elijah Wood) travels to a remote cabin to reconnect with his estranged father before an abrupt mid-plot twist. In the latter, the Connolly sisters, Mary Beth (Morgan Saylor) and Priscilla (Sophie Lowe), uncover their small town's darkest secrets after their mother dies. Watch these when you're in the mood for a couple of murder movies with momentum.

***The Lodge* (Dir. Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala) + *Vivarium* (Dir. Lorcan Finnegan)**

In *The Lodge* and *Vivarium*, there's no escape. Perfectly paced, each film places viewers in purgatory along with the protagonists. As time stretches into a never-ending and eerily repetitive pattern in *The Lodge*, prospective stepmother Grace's (Riley Keough) limits are tested during a solo retreat with her boyfriend's children. Little does she know things are not what they seem. *Vivarium*'s purgatory is more clear-cut, though that somehow doesn't make it any less mysterious as couple Gemma (Imogen Poots) and Tom (Jesse Eisenberg) are tasked with raising a random child. While these surrogate parents struggle, their respective wards strive or suffer based on the distinct dystopia they inhabit. Watch these when things seem stale and you feel stuck, to remind you it could be much, much worse.

***Straight Up* (Dir. James Sweeney) + *Buffaloed* (Dir. Tanya Wexler)**

Looking for fantastical yet authentic characters? These films have them. *Straight Up* is admittedly a more substantial movie than *Buffaloed*, but they work wonders as companion pieces. A dialogue-driven film that invites viewers to question the elastic definitions of love and sexuality as Rory (Katie Findlay) and Todd (James Sweeney) navigate “a love story without the thrill of copulation,” *Straight Up* is a relevant and resonant rom-com. This is the impressive result of writer-director Sweeney's clear vision as carried out by competent actors. But *Buffaloed* isn't far behind. More silly than soul-searching, it retains the same

Film | *Year in Review*

The Assistant (left) and *Sound of Metal*

high energy as *Straight Up*. Together, they provide the sort of boost usually reserved for in-real-life experiences (remember those?). *Buffaloed* is also proof that Zoey Deutch can carry a film, especially when the lead role calls for a smartass slacker turned schemer (see also 2017's *Flower*). Following Peg Dahl (Deutch) as she hatches a plan to escape her hometown of Buffalo, New York, by becoming a debt collector and waging war on the city's debt-collecting kingpin, the movie is a fun "fuck you" to capitalism to boot. Watch these when you need a pick-me-up courtesy of challenging society's most suffocating structures.

***Spree* (Dir. Eugene Kotlyarenko) + *Freaky* (Dir. Christopher Landon)**

In a year that saw numerous vacation horror movies (*The Lodge*, *The Rental*, *The Beach House*, and so on), *Spree* and *Freaky*, two teen horror-comedies of the slasher variety, stuck to the inescapable horrors of high school. *Spree* is a joyride through the sinister side effects of social media as Kurt (Joe Keery), an amateur streamer looking to go viral, becomes a rideshare driver for the content. *Freaky* is *The Hot Chick* as horror and sees Millie (Kathryn Newton) and The Butcher (Vince Vaughn) swap bodies. Watch these when you want to relive your glory days with much more gore.

***The Half of It* (Dir. Alice Wu) + *Castle in the Ground* (Dir. Joey Klein)**

This next double-feature delves even further into the teenage experience. *Castle in the Ground* is a somber, if not sober, look at the bleak reality of the opioid epidemic that sees Henry's (Alex Wolff) drug-fueled demise after his mother's untimely death. While *The Half of It* might feel tame in comparison, it is just as genuine. It follows Ellie Chu (Leah Lewis), a smart but cash-strapped teen who agrees to write a love letter for a jock, only to end up becoming his friend and falling for his crush in the process. Watch these films when you need to feel something.

***A Good Woman Is Hard to Find* (Dir. Abner Pastoll) +**

***I'm Your Woman* (Dir. Julia Hart)**

The titles alone point to the sort of call and response structure of this double feature. In each, the titular women snap out of submission, undergoing a powerful transformation

after the misdeeds of men have fucked up their lives. *A Good Woman Is Hard to Find* follows the murder of Sarah's (Sarah Bolger) husband in front of their son, pushing her into the role of the protagonist and protector, where she absolutely shines. That this multi-dimensional performance exists in a genre where the lead roles are usually reserved for men is a victory for the viewers as much as it is for the creators. And as if to say it's getting easier to find a good woman (or more like good roles for women), in comes another slow burn with an ending that's worth the wait. Set in the 1970s, *I'm Your Woman* sees Jean (Rachel Brosnahan) forced to go on the run with her infant son after her husband betrays his partners. Revitalizing the genre by expanding on a recognizable format to include a new perspective, these female-driven films have made a smart choice placing the women behind the wheel. Watch these when you're up for a wild ride.

***Becky* (Dir. Jonathan Milott and Cary Murnion) +**

***Alone* (Dir. John Hyams)**

It's exciting to see the titular Becky (Lulu Wilson) channel teen angst into exceedingly creative and increasingly cruel ways to fight back against a group of home invaders intent on fucking up her family vacation. Watching Wilson, a force to be reckoned with, play her character strong from the start and with a bit of a smirk is wholly compelling. *Alone* is like if Becky grew up to be Jessica (Jules Willcox), who has the same will to survive and ability to outsmart and outrun her tormentor in this fast-paced survival thriller. Watch these when you want to feel like a badass.

***Possessor* (Dir. Brandon Cronenberg) +**

***Black Bear* (Dir. Lawrence Michael Levine)**

Both *Possessor* and *Black Bear* want to know what people are willing to sacrifice for the perfect performance. The first film follows elite agent Tasya Vos (Andrea Riseborough), who works for a secretive organization that uses brain-implant technology to inhabit other people's consciousnesses. The second film follows Allison (Aubrey Plaza), a filmmaker and actor seeking solace from her tumultuous past at a cabin in the woods. Both are smart and ambitious cultural commentaries that run on a relentless tension as these women struggle to decide how far they'll go for their jobs. Watch these when you want to grapple with your existence. 📖

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NOW PLAYING

RR *Another Round*

Microdosing—otherwise known as taking small doses of your substance of choice for more mild effects—has been somewhat in vogue as of late. It certainly has appeal on paper: who wouldn't want a mellow mind without the pains of being drunk or high, or to have more focus and ease during the work day? This is the crux of Thomas Vinterberg's *Another Round*—Denmark's official Oscar contender—which follows four high school teachers who attempt to maintain a constant level of inebriation to achieve a happier life. Like the boozy experiment, the film itself can appear to be a silly premise at times—and there are moments of humor throughout—but *Another Round* also lays the groundwork for rife emotional vulnerability and exploration among its characters. Mads Mikkelsen is always exciting to watch, but he is more commanding than ever here (both in his acting prowess and his brazen, euphoric dancing). —**CODY CORRALL** *117 min. Gene Siskel Film Center From Your Sofa, Music Box At Home*

Fatale

Fatale chronicles a one-night stand gone awry, emphasizing how far a woman scorned will go to exact revenge. Following a passionate and adulterous affair between Derrick (Michael Ealy), a successful sports agent, and Valerie (Hilary Swank), a police detective, Derrick's life begins to unravel. With Valerie becoming increasingly aggressive, the movie calls to mind *Fatal Attraction* and is not nearly as unpredictable as it wants to be. Unfortunately, it has an exceptionally "bitches be crazy" vibe instead, where the men are married, and the women are manipulative. Fortunately, the titular femme fatale offers viewers an engaging performance thanks to Swank's acting chops and ass-kicking abilities. That's not enough to save an otherwise average take on the classic cat and mouse movie. Add that *Fatale* ultimately fizzles into a morality tale with "don't cheat" tacked on as the final line, and it becomes clear this is more of an affair to forget. —**BECCA JAMES** *102 min. In wide release on VOD*

Greenland

John Garrity (Gerard Butler) is having a bad day: his marriage to Allison (Morena Baccarin) is on the rocks, his son needs regular insulin injections, and a planet-kill-

ing comet set to destroy 75 percent of life is streaking towards the Earth. *Greenland* follows the same model seen in other world-ending romps: introduce the threat, run, dodge death, survive, only this one is more grounded. No Bruce Willis to save the day. There is going to be a big ice hole. What starts as a potentially interesting class narrative on privilege, where people with important skills are handpicked to survive the coming apocalypse (but not actually save the world), while others are left to die, descends into a tired formulaic plot. The inciting ice-ident comes early, then the story devolves into eye-rolling boring scenes of trying to get into cars or on planes. After 2020, everyone will recognize the self-seeking chaos, desperate looting, and frequent groans when the TV anchors announce increasingly bad news ("planet killer" is constantly repeated, in case you missed it). Despite the thin plot, and one awful CGI fire, the special effects hit the mark. Butler is a two-dimensional everyman with one goal, saving his family. Baccarin is saddled with the sexist role of disempowered, crying mother. The truth that our selfish human nature leaves us woefully unprepared to save the majority of people in the case of impending disaster, despite our resources and intelligence, is a point no one surviving our current real-life disaster movie needs reminding of. —**JOSH FLANDERS** *120 min. In wide release on VOD*

RR *Let Them All Talk*

At once charismatic and off-kilter, Steven Soderbergh's latest feature now streaming on HBO Max stars Meryl Streep as a Pulitzer-prize winning novelist who invites her two oldest friends (Candice Bergen and Dianne Wiest) and her nephew (Lucas Hedges) on a luxury ship for a voyage to the UK where she's slated to receive a prestigious award. Also on board is Gemma Chan, playing the novelist's literary agent desperate to garner information about her client's progress on a new manuscript. The film's project is unclear, at times appearing as an awkward comedy of errors, at other times a half-snarky half-sincere meditation on the process and price of creativity. Still, the performances are compelling, the setting gorgeous, the cinematography crisp, making up for the story's overall disorientation. —**NINA LI COOMES** *113 min. HBO Max*

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

RR *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

The film adaptation of the August Wilson play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* shows how Black folks navigate the power struggles that white structures create. It is unsurprisingly a cinematic masterpiece with a commanding Viola Davis as Ma Rainey, a dancing and singing Chadwick Boseman (in his final role) as her trumpet player Levee, and a stellar cast of other co-stars—all wrapped up in the working city. It is the only play in Wilson's series known as The American Century Cycle that features a historical figure and the only one set in Chicago. In 1927, Chicago was just eight years removed from the Chicago race riot of 1919, and the Great Migration of Black people moving to northern cities like Chicago had been happening for about a decade. Although the structures of white supremacy in Chicago looked different from those in the south, they were still very much prevalent and that tension is what the film's characters walk into when they arrive in the city for a recording session. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is pure art, just as beautiful as it is heartbreaking. —**ARIONNE NETTLES** *104 min. Netflix*

Monster Hunter

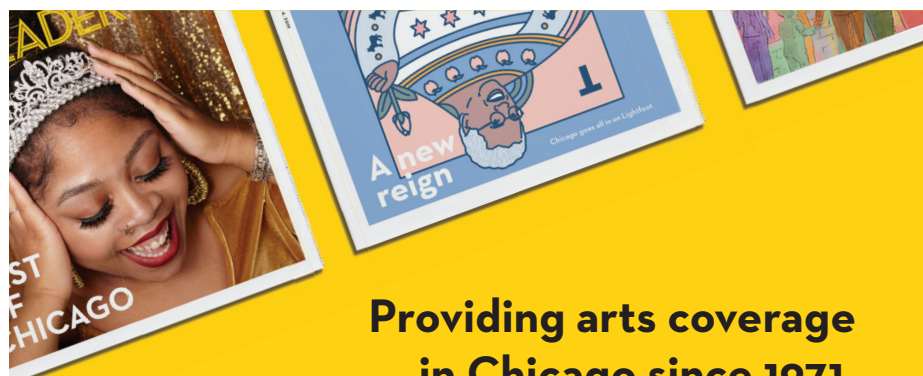
Monster Hunter is exactly what it sounds like, another vehicle for teenage-boy-trapped-in-a-man-bod Paul W.S. Anderson to cast his wife Milla "Resident Evil" Jovovich in a kill-them-all action romp. Meet Lt. Artemis (yes, the whole film is this on the nose), a badass army ranger (who'd barely pass as a disgruntled volleyball player) whose unit gets inexplicably teleported to the "new world" inhabited by, you guessed it, monsters. After giant spiders kill off her crew in a sequence directly ripped off *Aliens* and *Starship Troopers*—only without all the suspense and terror—Artemis loses all discipline and any sense of character to team up with the Hunter (Tony Jaa), but only after the obligatory, senseless extended fight sequence when they realize they need to join forces. Cue the training montage. Based on the popular narrative-free video game *Monster Hunter*, Anderson decided to make this loosely strung together movie the same way. It's as predictable as the action lines it pilfers, like "this is above my paygrade," "they don't just disappear," and my favorite, "she's a woman, but...". #Feminism. While the plot is on the nose, lacking all nuance and subtlety, constantly stealing from other films, and dialogue is groan worthy, the glorious CGI special effects and eardrum-piercing sound are sensory candy for home theaters. The spastic editing is what you'd expect from a guy named Doobie White. Ron Perlman has a phoned-in walk-on as a 1970s surfer-haired steampunk sand-pirate and there's a great pirate cat-chef who teases a better anthropomorphic pirate sequel we're bound to suffer. —**JOSH FLANDERS** *105 min. In wide release on VOD*

RR *News of the World*

In *News of the World*, Captain Jefferson Kyle Kidd (Tom Hanks), an 1870s equivalent of a travelling newscaster, is tasked with returning Johanna (Helena Zengel), a ten-year-old girl taken in by the Kiowa tribe six-years prior and raised as one of their own, to her biological family. In order to bring the girl back to her family homestead, the pair travel across the Texas wilderness, encountering a series of trials and tribulations that bring them closer together as they both attempt to return to the places of their past, haunted by the painful memories keeping them away. The film, an adaptation of the 2016 Paulette Jiles novel, offers up a series of vignettes of the tense encounters with the various hardscrabble characters of Reconstruction era Texas. Director Paul Greengrass maintains his typical hand-held style as cinematographer Dariusz Wolski presents a considered eye on the sweeping desert landscapes. Meanwhile, Hanks and Zengel play off of each other well in the charming unlikely friendship that develops. Overall, the narrative is familiar, though entertaining, with some tidy lessons on racial animosity, greed, and perversion of truth along the way that serve as an obvious parable for the unequal power dynamics at play in contemporary America. —**ADAM MULLINS-KHATIB** *118 min. In wide release on VOD*

Wild Mountain Thyme

If you are going to make a movie about an elderly Irish farmer who thinks his unmarried son Anthony (Jamie Dornan) is too weird to take good care of the land for him when he dies, that farmer had better be Christopher Walken. Because, why not. It doesn't even matter about the accent, which he gives the old college try. The scenes between Walken's character Tony Reilly and Dornan give us some of the sharpest moments in this otherwise largely saccharine effort from screenwriter and director John Patrick Shanley, adapted from his 2014 play *Outside Mullingar*. Anthony spends the movie in one of the most agonizing courtships in movie history with Rosemary, played by Emily Blunt. Blunt's sly humor redeems a flimsy role, which in lesser hands might easily have read as a vehicle for being seen a lot on horseback over the course of a film. The American cousin to whom old man Reilly considers signing over the farm instead of Anthony is played by Jon Hamm. I would love it if this were the movie that discovered the gifted character inside Hamm's body, like *Burn After Reading* did for Brad Pitt, but this isn't that movie. There is a wonderful scene between Hamm and Blunt, where he condescends to her for holding on too long to childish romantic fantasies. Blunt replies, shrewdly, that he is a New York City banker who wants to be a farmer in Ireland and shouldn't talk. But these are glimmers. By the time Anthony and Rosemary's oh-so torrid passions have achieved any specificity, we are well into the second act and have looked at a lot of cows for no reason. —**MAX MALLER** *102 min. In wide release on VOD*



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Year in Review | Music



The best overlooked Chicago records of 2020

We've all had a lot to pay attention to this year, but there's always room for more great music.

By LEOR GALIL

End-of-year-list season can feel like a chore, even if you're not one of the people whose job requires you to make those lists. Just keeping track of what everybody else thinks are the best albums, movies, books, TV shows, and so forth is an exhausting undertaking. And every year I get déjà vu as I see the same albums appear arranged in different orders by high-profile critics and major

outlets. Chicagoland critic Rob Mitchum is once again collating all the big album lists into a single ranking with a Google Sheet, making it even easier for me to see 2020's consensus picks emerging.

Music criticism can tell us as much about the way we live as the music it covers, and a great list can do this more easily than a single album review. If you've ever made a playlist,

received a mixtape from a new partner, or lost track of time during a sprawling late-night DJ set, you understand how assembling pieces of music helps them communicate with one another in ways their creators never considered or intended. Lists do something similar, adding the extra dimension of calendar time—and because this year has felt a lifetime long, I'm grateful to be reminded about an album that seems to belong to a different era but actually came out in February.

Jeff Parker's *Suite for Max Brown* is just such an album. When International Anthem released it in January, it was met with near universal acclaim, but of the dozen or so major lists I've read so far, only a couple have included it. I wonder if critics have forgotten about it because it belongs to the Before Times, even though it came out just 11 months ago. Parker celebrated *Suite for Max Brown* with four sold-out sets at Dorian's the first weekend in March, a week before COVID-related cancellations brought live music in the U.S. to an

abrupt halt.

Thinking about music in 2020 means thinking about how the ways I usually experience it with other people have almost all been closed off to me or transformed. I've watched the occasional livestream, but I find that such a passive way to see a show—it just makes me yearn for the day I'll be able to return to a venue to see a band I barely know transform the energy of a jam-packed room. That's not to say virtual music events don't have their virtues, but I think they work better when they're not trying to stand in for real-world shows—I got a real kick out of a *Minecraft* festival that couldn't have been replicated IRL.

Most record stores have reopened to in-person customers to some degree since March's shutdowns, but I haven't gone back to one yet. I don't own a car or bike, and pandemic anxiety has kept me off public transit and away from taxis and ride-share services (which has also put most protests frustratingly out of reach). With few exceptions, my orbit

Music | *Year in Review*

Top row: cover art for Buggin, Casper McFadden, and Harvey Waters. Bottom row: cover art for Jusell, Prymek, Sage, Shiroishi; Tree; and Buggin again.

has shrunk to walking distance. Off the Internet, the closest I've come to sharing music with another human has been at the grocery store—and I think I got more out of sashaying to Natalie Imbruglia's "Torn" in an empty aisle than the stranger who rounded the corner on me and said, "You do you."

I continued to seek out new music, though, out of professional obligation and personal curiosity. I trawled Bandcamp tags into the wee hours, searching for unfamiliar sounds, and spent entire afternoons with YouTube rips of recent punk tapes. This year I started keeping a running Google Sheet of every new-to-me EP or album I'd listened to in its entirety, and it's topped 800 entries so far. The majority were released in 2020, and more than half of those come from Chicago. Since live music shut down, I've zeroed in more than usual on music made by locals, partly because I've lost the outlet of previewing concerts by touring artists. But by increasing my focus on material that hasn't gotten much if any attention outside the city (or even within it), I've made the process of combing through "best albums" lists—which tend to take a much broader view—feel especially isolating for me.

I still find value in "best of" lists. To paraphrase one of my favorite Substack writers, Miranda Reinert of Wendy House Press, there are plenty of people who want to find new music but don't know where to start. These lists are a good place.

When I make my own lists, though, I prefer to restrict myself to lesser-known releases, not least because my choices don't put me in a good position to decide among the well-established acts that tend to turn up on broader lists. At the *Reader*, I've made a habit of compiling year-in-review lists dedicated to overlooked local music, a task complicated by a rule I set for myself: I can't include any of the overlooked local music I've already written about that year.

For instance, Ozzuorio's fusion of industrial music and black metal on *Existence Is Pain*, which pushes both genres outside their comfort zones, was in my opinion unjustly ignored, but I didn't include it because the project came up in a recent installment of the Gossip Wolf column I share with J.R. Nelson. If I'd had more time and space, I'm sure I would've already written about these five releases too.

Buggin, *Buggin Out*

Buggin treat beatdown hardcore to a refreshing energy-drink bath on this EP. Their husky guitar riffs and athletic rhythms combine an aggressive attitude with nonstop hooks; vocalist Bryanna Bennett sets off the band's powder keg with her hoarse vocals and gnomish lyrics.

Casper McFadden, *Audio Diary*

Casper McFadden nonchalantly assembles collages of palpitating footwork synths, hyperactive breakbeat loops, and vocal samples pushed into the red, reshaping their structures throughout to keep you on the edge of your seat even when he slows the tempo down.

Harvey Waters, *Air Sits Heavy*

Harvey Waters play rich, wall-of-sound dream pop whose melodies sparkle through the haze—its earthy guitars and knot-in-your-throat vocals defy the conventions of the genre to embrace the listener from the front of the mix.

Jusell, Prymek, Sage, Shiroishi, *Fuubutsushi*

Chicago experimental artist Matthew Sage didn't need to worry about social distancing when he created this album with three far-flung collaborators—Chris Jusell in Arizona, Chaz Prymek in Missouri, and Patrick Shiroishi in Los Angeles. We could all aspire to treat everyone with the tenderness these four show one another on this frisky, buoyant ambient-jazz album.

Tree, *Free Credit*

Not to be confused with critically acclaimed Chicago rapper-producer MC Tree G, this local hip-hop producer recruited a terrific team of MCs (including MFñ Melo, Brittney Carter, and Solo the Dweeb) to enhance his exquisite, dreamlike instrumentals. 

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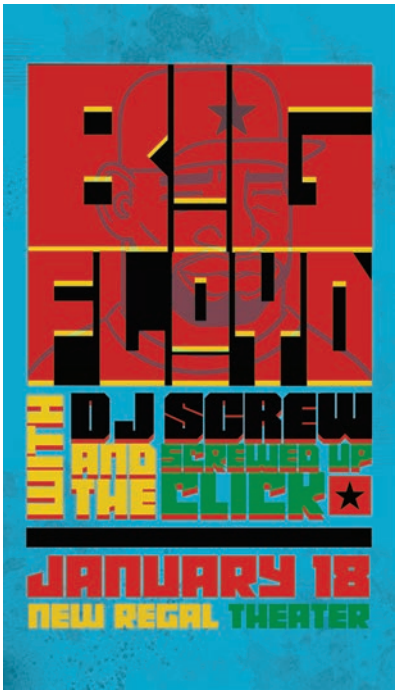
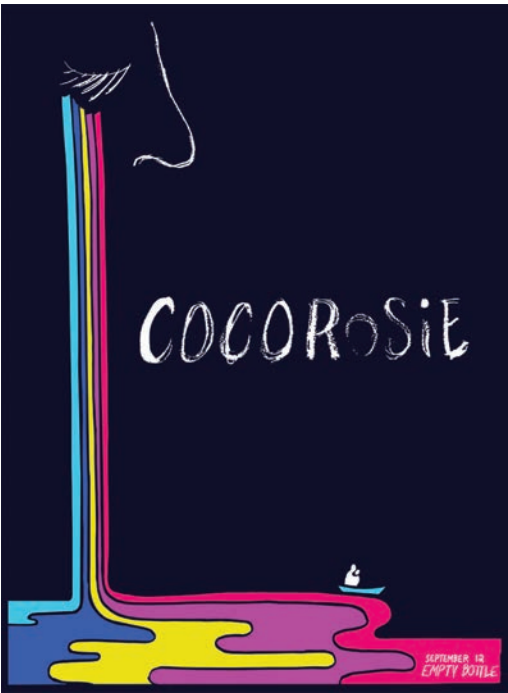
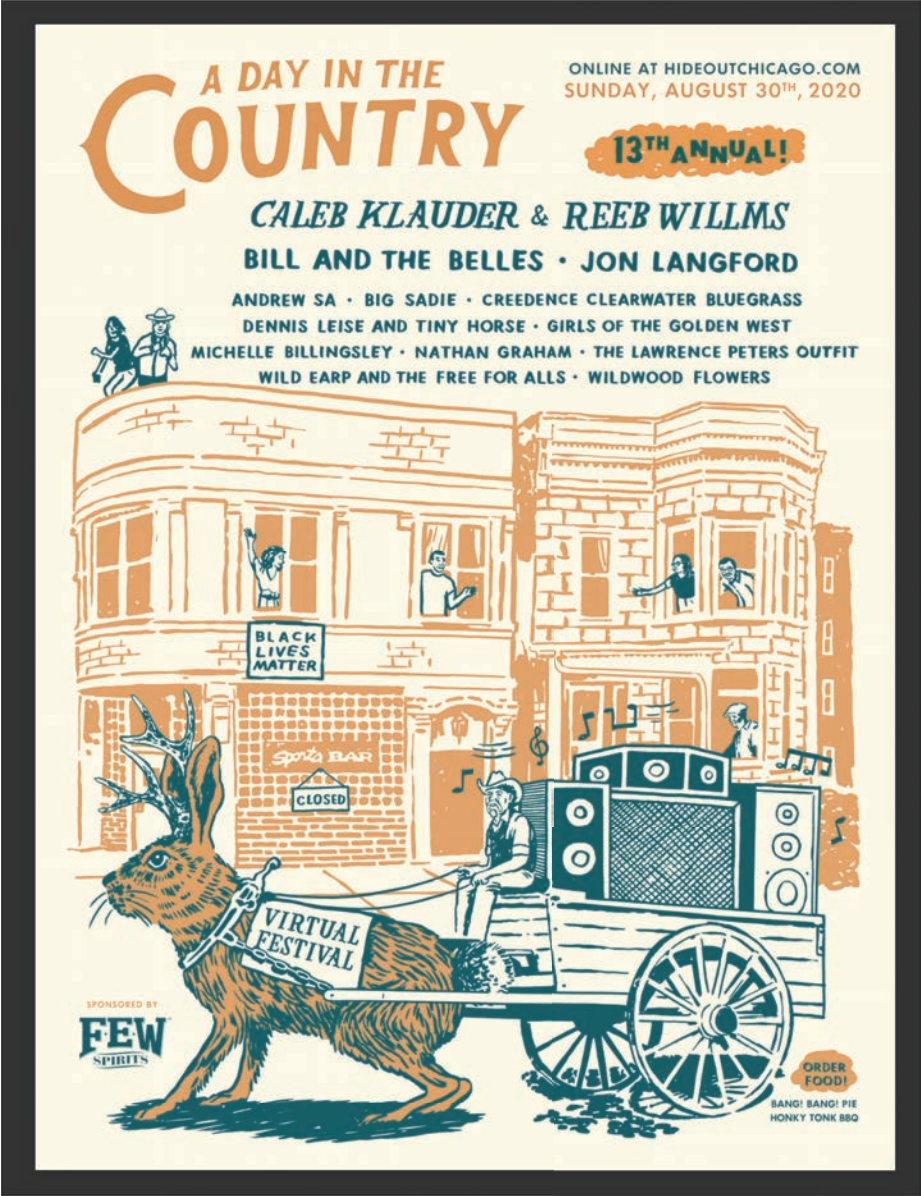
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Year in Review | Music





Left: Poster by Steve Walters at Screwball Press

Facing page, clockwise from top left: Posters by Ryan Duggan, Heather Anderson, Tesh Silver, Chema Skandal, Jay Ryan, and Andrea Hill Fitzgerald. Anderson, Silver, and Fitzgerald all made “fantasy” gig posters for show they wish could happen; the others are for actual events.

Showcasing gig posters in a year short on gigs

The *Reader* got creative to find ways to keep uplifting Chicago artists in 2020.

By SALEM COLLO-JULIN

In early 2011 the *Reader* launched a re-designed print edition that flipped the music section upside down—the B Side, as it was called, began with an inverted back cover and even had its own table of contents. Our Gig Poster of the Week feature began on that table of contents, as a way to showcase a different segment of the Chicago music community. It’s been online only for years, and I took it over when I started at the *Reader* in February 2019—though I’m pretty sure that all the silliest headlines have been the work of music editor Philip Montoro.

My predecessor (and fellow music writer) Luca Cimarusti showed me the ropes, gave me a short list of some of his favorite artists,

and showed me some of his favorites among the posters he’d published. Soon going on the hunt for gig posters became one of my favorite parts of my job—I even started arriving at concerts earlier to see if I could find anything at the venue that might make a future column.

I reached out to past *Reader* associate editor Kevin Warwick, who did part of what’s now my job when he first started working for the paper, to ask him about the rationale behind publishing gig posters. Warwick explained that it was intended to give a platform to “artists who may not have necessarily held proper gallery shows, but instead had their art taped to the inside of record store windows and stapled all over the Empty Bottle,

Schubas, Subterranean, and other venues.”

Now that social media exists, stapling pieces of paper to publicly trafficked walls isn’t the go-to promotional device that it was in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. That said, gig posters are still an important part of the concertgoing experience—and thus their creators are too.

I like to seek out Chicago cultural histories, so my favorite posters tend to be the ones with more details about the show—knowing years and addresses, for instance, is helpful to us amateur librarians. But I also appreciate the cacophony of city life, which is often reflected in the blissful randomness of gig poster art. Warwick explained that the *Reader* began by publishing posters for shows its writers were covering, but at some point the series became “an easy opportunity to show off art that no one other than the venues themselves and a small—and very engaged—gig-poster community was really showing off.”

Of course, 2020 has been a lean year for gig posters. Since March, the pandemic has forced the cancellation of almost all the concerts and in-store performances that would have begat posters in the first place.

In March, faced with an acute shortage of current gig posters, I posted the first of what would be several weeks of stand-ins: a 1937 poster for a performance of the Illinois Symphony Orchestra at the Great Northern Theater (at Quincy and Dearborn in those days). It was printed as part of the Works Progress Administration’s effort to support artists and musicians during the Great Depression by creating paying jobs in their fields. Present-day elected officials: Please remember that this is an option. Future generations will thank you.

This planted a seed for me: Why not ask the people who love this column to help create it?

I was still sorting out how to proceed when I saw a drawing by Nicole Marroquin about singing DeBarge to your houseplants. Obviously it wasn’t a gig poster, but it got me thinking, and I decided to invite people to submit not just posters from past Chicago concerts but also “fantasy gig posters” for gigs that hadn’t happened but should have. I posted Marroquin’s art when I made my pitch in early April: “Do you wish the 1972 lineup of the Art Ensemble of Chicago could play at Constellation? How about Dolly Parton and

Wesley Willis at Lounge Ax?”

The *Reader* was subsequently blessed with some great fantasy posters from y’all. Artist Eric J. Garcia imagined Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz returning from the dead to lead a hardcore band at shuttered Pilsen venue Casa Aztlán. Artist Andrea Hill Fitzgerald drew Prince riding a bike around the south side before a gig at the Avalon Regal (sadly, neither actually happened). Artist Heather Anderson made a poster advertising a wished-for Coco Rosie show at the Empty Bottle.

The Gig Poster of the Week also became a way to honor the fallen. In June, when protests against racist police brutality were all that any of us were thinking about, I asked artist Tesh Silver to help me design a tribute to George Floyd—it took the form of a poster for a gig “Big Floyd” might’ve played with his erstwhile collaborator DJ Screw had his life taken a different turn. And after Dave “Medusa” Shelton died in August, I heard from artist Rob Schwager, who’d made posters in the late 80s and early 90s for concerts at Cabaret Metro and Double Door. He graciously gave me permission to use one he’d created for a 1987 Meatmen gig at the original Medusa’s location on Sheffield.

Over the summer, livestreams, drive-in concerts, and socially distanced outdoor shows became enough of a thing that I could pretty reliably find an interesting poster for at least one of them every week. I’m still accepting fantasy posters (because I love them), but more and more often I have art to choose from that’s promoting actual events.

I doubt I’ll ever get back to seeing posters all over the place outside like I used to in the 90s, but right now it’s not even the same as it was in February 2020. But as long as people aren’t too stupid about the COVID vaccine and we all stick to public-health guidelines in the meantime, there’s a good chance that in-person shows as we knew them will come back. Let’s hope we still have independent music venues by then. In any case, I’m optimistic that once we’ve got a healthy number of gigs again, artists will return to making gig posters. If they’ve got the energy and we give them our support, they’ll continue to bless our city with their creations. 📌

🐦 @hollo



Femdot, aka Femi Adigun, coordinates volunteers delivering groceries for his Scholars Slide By program.  MATTHEW GILSON FOR CHICAGO READER

Chicago's independent musicians stepped up their activism in 2020

With concerts and tours on hold for most of the year, the city's music scene doubled down on mutual aid and fundraising for community groups.

By JACK RIEDY

The major-label music industry is doing its best to pretend the pandemic is over. Despite an accelerating death toll, high-profile artists and organizations have spent the last half of this long year bringing audiences into indoor venues for award shows (the AMAs), album-release parties (T.I.), and even full concerts (Trey Songz, Chase Rice, Great White).

Thankfully most musicians have respected

their fans enough to prioritize the common good above the familiar rush of a crowd. In Chicago, as in so many other American cities, independent artists have watched their neighbors struggle not only with COVID-19 and all the inequities it exacerbates but also with racist police violence and a callous or hostile government response to their suffering. They've seen a trickle of government aid arrive, often inaccessible to the people who need it most

and pathetically inadequate to the scale of economic hardship caused by the pandemic.

Like many other working Chicagoans, these musicians have decided to step in to help their communities directly. None of them has been able to tour or support themselves with shows, but some have put even writing and recording on hold to focus on mutual aid. Others have continued to release music but used their album cycles to raise funds for vulnerable

communities.

Throughout 2020, Chicago musicians started projects to connect their neighbors with the resources they need. Rapper and educator Matt Muse helped launch Washington Park grocery drive the People's Grab-N-Go after Chicago Public Schools suspended its meal distribution program on May 31. The Grab-N-Go began as an impromptu Costco trip but soon expanded to involve more than 30 volunteers. By the time the grassroots program wrapped up at the end of August, it had provided food and supplies to more than 4,000 families.

Muse had previously coordinated the Love & Nappyness Hair Care Drive during the 2019 holiday season, an effort he repeated this fall. But as he told the *Reader* this summer, working for the Grab-N-Go helped him realize that "Chicago has a huge resource problem."

Rapper Femdot, who's friends with Muse, was inspired by the Grab-N-Go to launch a grocery delivery program called the Scholars Slide By through his nonprofit, Delacreme Scholars. "After volunteering with the People's Grab-N-Go distribution site, we started thinking about, What about people who can't get here? How can we make sure that people who couldn't reach these sites still get food?" Femdot says. "We have a platform—why don't we use it to help connect some of the dots and work in conjunction with great initiatives already going on?"

Femdot, born Femi Adigun, and a crew of 25 to 50 volunteers delivered groceries "no questions asked" throughout Chicago and nearby suburbs every other weekend from June till September. In total, the Slide By served 457 families, with an average size of four people, buying what each one needed by soliciting shopping lists.

The two rappers used their social media pages to spread the word among their fans. Their mutual-aid projects sometimes shared leaders and volunteers with each other and with Feed the West Side, launched by John Walt Foundation executive director Nachele Pugh, Pivot Gang cofounder Frsh Waters, and photographer Qurissy Lopez. But Muse and Femdot both refrained from releasing music over the summer—not till late September did Muse drop his first song of 2020, a remix of his 2019 track "Shotgun" that added a Femdot feature.

Many other musicians continued to release

Music | *Year in Review*



Ohmme (left) and Nnamdi both used their music to fundraise for community groups and mutual-aid projects. 📸 ASH DYE (LEFT); STEPHANIE BROOKS (RIGHT)

music but used it to raise money for community organizations, activist groups, GoFundMe campaigns, and more—especially on the Fridays when digital music retailer Bandcamp passed along its share of sales revenue to artists and labels. (Full disclosure: I’ve written freelance articles for Bandcamp’s editorial site.)

Nnamdi Ogbonnaya, who performs as Nnamdi, released the album *Brat* in April, but because he couldn’t hit the road to promote it, he just kept recording in his home studio. In June, after protests began in Chicago in response to the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, he began releasing the results as Bandcamp exclusives.

In addition to *Brat* and July’s instrumental album *Krazy Karl*, Ogbonnaya released three singles and an EP that he explicitly used as fundraisers. “I was following a lot of activists and Black Lives Matter pages for Chicago, they were always posting resources and ways to help people,” he says.

June’s *Black Plight*, three hardcore songs about racist police violence, was the top-selling item on Bandcamp for an entire week, and Ogbonnaya donated the proceeds to Assata’s Daughters and EAT Chicago. Other beneficiaries of his releases include the Chicago Community Bond Fund, the Illinois Prison Project, Brave Space Alliance, and grassroots food drives run by his friends on the south side. Ogbonnaya estimates that he raised \$12,000 “for different organizations that I think are doing amazing work.” Sooper Records, the indie label he co-owns, also gave \$1,500 to My Block, My Hood, My City in June.

Macie Stewart and Sima Cunningham of

art-rock duo Ohmme likewise had to cancel their tours when the pandemic hit the U.S. in the spring, but they soon began livestreaming performances as fundraisers, starting with a March 24 performance to benefit the KC Tenants mutual aid fund in Kansas City. The group released their sophomore album, *Fantasize Your Ghost*, on June 5 (the first Bandcamp Friday to fall during the current wave of Black Lives Matter protests) and donated all proceeds from the day’s sales to Assata’s Daughters.

Ohmme have also used livestreams and merch sales to raise funds for Chicago Community Jail Support, Brave Space Alliance, the Montessori School of Englewood, voting-access groups, and Kooyrigs, an organization that supports Armenian women and refugees from the recent armed conflict in Artsakh (Cunningham has Armenian heritage). The duo estimate they’ve raised between \$5,000 and \$6,000 in 2020, as individuals and together. “It’s been an intense year to say the least,” they say. “We focused primarily on young Chicago-based organizations that are building up a team to do really impactful work in communities we think are important and deserve more resources.”

Ohmme also contributed a track to this month’s compilation *Warm Violet*, which benefits Chicago Community Jail Support’s efforts to winterize its post outside Cook County Jail. Stewart, a CCJS volunteer, was also one of several curators for the 46-track compilation (along with Avery Springer of Retirement Party), and its packed roster of local indie talent includes Fire-Toolz, Ariel Zetina, Bill MacKay, Angel Bat Dawid, and a collaboration

between Nnamdi and Post Animal. Two runs of 90-minute cassettes quickly sold out, but digital sales continue; so far the compilation has raised more than \$8,000.

Ogbonnaya also appears on *Art Is Love Vol. 1*, a similarly scene-spanning comp released in May by indie label and rap crew Why? Records and benefiting the Chicago Community Bond Fund. “We wanted to donate locally, because we’re firm believers in starting at a community level,” Why? member Ruby Watson told *Chicago* magazine. The release has raised around \$2,000 to date.

Regardless of their approach, Chicago’s activist-musicians had to improvise in 2020—even old hands were forced to adapt to the evolving pandemic. The Scholars Slide By learned as they did the work, coordinating volunteers for purchases and deliveries while raising funds for their wholly donation-based program. “It was kind of made on the fly, so all logistical adjustments had to be made on the fly as well,” Adigun says. Meanwhile, Ohmme faced challenges unique to fundraising livestreams: they had to find work-arounds to link to organizations that aren’t 501(c)(3) certified, due to limitations built into Instagram.

Ogbonnaya notes that donations slowed down as the year progressed. “Like most announcements, the initial reveal garners the most attention, and then donations dwindled as the days went on,” he says. “But I was lucky enough to have some good donation days right at the beginning.”

All the artists interviewed for this story hope to continue their activism next year, but they’re still figuring out how to do so sustainably, without exhausting themselves or their

potential donors. “The unfortunate reality is people will always need help with food, at least based on the way the world is currently set up,” Adigun says. “So it would be great to continue the Slide By next summer and every summer, but it depends on funding.” In the meantime, Delacreme Scholars has turned its attention to its annual scholarships and a holiday toy and coat drive, which ended December 15.

Ogbonnaya is prioritizing consistent donations in the future. “I read a lot of places love consistent monthly donations, even if they are smaller, because it’s something they know they can always rely on,” he says. “Big donations are also good, obviously, but the consistency really helps organizations budget better, so I’m finding places to donate to every month.”

Many other musicians worked for their communities in 2020, at every level. Sen Morimoto and Tasha played an August 5 livestream to benefit the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project, for instance—and too many artists to count made unpublicized donations to individuals and organizations in need. Some focused on supporting unemployed musicians and venue staff, via livestream performances such as the CIVLization series (which raises money for the CIVL SAVE Emergency Relief Fund) and compilations such as July’s *Situation Chicago*. Ravenswood’s Experimental Sound Studio hosts the Quarantine Concerts, an ongoing livestream series that between March 21 and December 1 presented 182 shows and distributed more than \$87,000 in fan donations to 1,100 or so artists.

Like many other Americans faced with a uniquely difficult year, Chicago’s musicians are looking for ways to make a long-lasting positive impact, to help their neighbors when existing structures of government and business fail them. “We had been talking about how to make fundraising, social justice, and accountability sustainable parts of our band before this year, but are certainly taking a deeper look at it going forward. It’s a balancing act, but it is well worth the effort,” say Stewart and Cunningham of Ohmme. “We know we won’t always do it quite right but know that the right thing is to continue doing, learning, listening, and uplifting our community.” 📺

🐦 @jackriedy



Doug Malone in the control room at Jamdek
DEREK WEBER

CHICAGOANS OF NOTE

Doug Malone, owner and lead engineer, Jamdek Recording Studio

"Something about a recording studio, I think it's always overlooked as a place for community."

As told to PHILIP MONTORO

Doug Malone, 33, has worked as a recording engineer since 2015, when he began interning at Humboldt Park studio Minbal while studying music composition at Columbia. In 2017 Malone bought the business, renamed it Jamdek, and took over as lead engineer. (He also plays in local trio Courtesy.) Jamdek suspended sessions for live tracking during the March shutdown, but resumed them in May.

Usually taking pandemic precautions entails a phone call with the band—they definitely have questions. Being in a closed studio, we all wear masks all the time. I stay in the control room mostly; they're in the live room. When we cut vocals, everyone leaves that room and that person does not

wear a mask, because that sounds different. I do usually put them in a vocal booth, so they're trapped in there with doors closed and it's sealed.

Every morning I go in and I wipe down all the equipment. Every headphone box, every headphone—anything that I assume will be touched by the band and myself. Even the console, if an engineer comes in.

The bands themselves, I generally feel they've been very good about staying home. But then there's me—I'm seeing lots of people. I try to at least get tested once a week. I do what I can to keep that information flow going—to let the bands know that I've been negative so far.

When essential businesses were allowed to

stay open, that conversation with a band was like, "OK, we're gonna record, but don't bring anyone in here. Just the band." The less bodies, the better. I normally have four interns. I've made them all stay home.

During the publicly enforced suggested shut-in, I was mostly mixing by myself—I didn't have anyone in there. About mid-March everything closed and all my sessions canceled. You don't necessarily have to have the band in while you're mixing, so there was a lot of phone calls and FaceTiming, Google chats, e-mailing. If they needed to finish something with overdubs, they would actually record that at home and send it to me.

Live tracking started again in May. Two of my very close friends and myself, we all got tested. So that was a good slow entrance back into it. Not only for my own sanity, to feel how it would be having people back in the studio, but to see how I could run it smoothly while still being safe.

The last thing you wanna have happen is for someone to get infected in there and then it be traced back. So the main concern was just taking everyone's temperature, making sure everybody's good. And plus not letting endless anxiety funnel into their performance. You don't want someone withholding themselves and freaking out the whole time.

Obviously bands can't play shows—they can't do really anything except on social media or maybe like a Twitch performance. So they're writing songs, and they're trying to stay safe and get together with their band, and they're recording a lot. I get e-mails every day about somebody wanting to book time to come in and track, and then mix it right away.

A lot of bands are coming in and making records because they just want to feel that they're still being productive. But they're just holding onto it, like, "Well, when should we do this? How should we release this? Should we even shop it around? Is anyone even signing bands right now, or putting out records?"

They're really thinking about the existential situation of being in a band. What does that mean? And how fragile it is at the moment. A majority of the time, I'm engineering but I'm also playing therapist. Making sure everyone's calm and having a good time, and cathartically getting that out by recording and making music.

I definitely feel like I'm busier now than a year ago. It's a really conflicted feeling, because

you get these e-mails of people being like, "We wanna record!" And I obviously need that income—I want to record because it's what I do. But it's hard to balance the morality of that.

What you have to put forth is, "Hey, if anyone is just feeling slightly uncomfortable or sick, you have to tell me." If you have four other people in the band, there's that pressure: "Ahh, I don't know if I can say this, because I don't want to let the other people down." And I have to step in and be like, "You're not letting them down. It's so important that you voice that." And then we just rebook it.

Back in May, I did get a Small Business Administration loan, and that helped a lot. My income from March to May, I lost easily ten grand. It was nosediving—I just had no idea what was going to happen. Yes, I was doing mixing work, but it was just nowhere near the caliber of what I was usually taking in.

I was applying constantly for different grants. I did receive a grant from the City of Chicago—it was through the City of Chicago artist community grants. Basically, if your spot that you're applying from has some significance in the artist community—which this studio does—then they were accepting applications, asking about the business.

Something about a recording studio, I think it's always overlooked as a place for community. During the pandemic I've really felt that. Even though they weren't recording, bands were still e-mailing me and checking in and saying really great things, like, "Hey, I know I'm not booking time there, but maybe I could book something later in the month and pay you now." Just to make sure I stayed afloat.

Yes, I had to pay the SBA loan back, but it was a cushion: "I'll at least make it for the next three months." Wintertime, January and February, is always a slow time for a studio. That's now the next hurdle.

I had my technician come in a couple weeks ago. Because he goes to all these studios to fix gear for them, he did tell me that my studio was one of the only ones that's very busy. I talk to a lot of engineers on a weekly basis. Speaking for a lot of studios, they're definitely struggling. Maybe they're not having clients that are comfortable with doing it. There's so many factors.

I've been very lucky, that I've had people just constantly booking the studio and keeping the business going. I'm super thankful for that. It's been long hours, but I keep working, expecting the next month to be a total scary situation. **[E]**

@pmontoro

PICK OF THE WEEK

DJ Earl demonstrates footwork's deep roots on *Bass + Funk & Soul*



📷 COURTESY THE ARTIST

DJ EARL, *BASS + FUNK & SOUL*

Moveltraxx

djearlteklife.bandcamp.com/album/mtxlt190-bass-funk-soul

SINCE CHICAGO FOOTWORK PRODUCER and Teklife member DJ Earl dropped his breakthrough 2016 debut, *Open Your Eyes*, he's traveled far outside the city and branched out into different sounds. In 2017, Earl dropped a genre-splicing dance full-length called *50 Backwoods* with in-demand Brooklyn producer Nick Hook, and this year his collaborations have included the hip-hop EPs *Paintings on the Porch* (with Detroit MC Sheefy McFly) and *Black Dobson* (with Chicago rapper and childhood friend Akem Eshu). Earl found inspiration for his second footwork album, *Bass + Funk & Soul* (Moveltraxx), in Brazil; as he recently told *Resident Advisor* podcast host Martha Pazienti Caidan, a Brazilian promoter he worked with introduced him to the country's funk music and gifted him a trove of digital files to sample. To make the new record, Earl worked those sound fragments into tapestries informed by his lissome yet brawny style—he can spotlight ultra-smooth melodies that add a layer of sophisticated polish while retaining footwork's complex rhythms and the cast iron toughness of its percussion. The honeyed vocal samples that skitter through “Wrk Dat Body” tame the track's cutting hi-hats and insistent bass line, which evokes the body-massaging throb you get from leaning on a wall of speakers at a loud concert. Earl also filtered his taste in classic Black pop into *Bass + Funk & Soul*, so that these tracks demonstrate footwork's place in the pantheon of American music. —**LEOR GALIL**



Cam Be 📷 MAYA IMAN

BORIS WITH MERZBOW, *2ROI2PO*

Relapse

borismerzbow.bandcamp.com/album/2roi2po

I tried to tally up the total number of releases by noise wizard Masami Akita, better known as Merzbow, and polymorphous metal trio Boris before I started writing about their new joint album, but it proved to be a fool's errand. These Japanese artists are among the most prolific musicians in modern history, and their combined catalogs include hundreds of titles. The brand-new *2ROI2PO* (a play on “RIP 2020,” a sentiment I think we can all get behind), is their eighth collaborative release since 2002. Merzbow and Boris are natural partners, as they both constantly evolve and push boundaries: Boris have seemingly mastered every heavy-music genre under the sun (most recently on the hardcore-driven *No*), and Merzbow's harsh-noise recordings, including November's *Screaming Dove*, have gotten more and more head-splittingly abrasive since he started in 1979. Unfortunately, when you're pumping out that much material, odds are it won't all be top-notch. For *2ROI2PO* Boris contributed an assortment of rerecorded older songs plus two new covers—“To the Beach” by Japanese alt-rock trio Coalter of the Deepers and the 1991 Melvins track “Boris,” which inspired the group's name—and Merzbow added electronics over the top. On the slower, sludgier tracks (always a Boris strength) the combination works perfectly, with heavy waves crashing together in hypnotic drones. But on most of the record, the collaborators feel disconnected from each other; at times Merzbow's glitchy swaths of noise distract from the excellent Boris songs rather than complementing them. This may not be the best outing

from either Boris or Merzbow, but they're both so passionate and creative that anything they touch is worth at least a few spins. —**LUCA CIMARUSTI**

CAM BE, *SUMMER IN SEPTEMBER*

Camovement

camovement.bandcamp.com/album/summer-in-september

Chicago composer, arranger, and multi-instrumentalist Cam Be draws on his community to invigorate his already bold musical ideas. On his new second album, *Summer in September* (on his own Camovement label), Cam and an ensemble of friends create immediately gratifying fusions of soul, funk, hip-hop, and R&B. Feel-good jam “Fade Away” opens with 16 people clapping on the twos and fours, jump-starting its relaxed but implacable rhythm and amping up its summertime-barbecue vibe—which provides a simpatico framework for Joshua Griffin's limber bass line, Sam Trump's smoky trumpet, and Chris Paquette's tender conga playing. These songs' beautiful renderings of communal joy can be a balm or a painful reminder of what's still out of reach, given that *Summer in September* came out while COVID-19 infections and deaths were trending upward in early December. But now that vaccines are beginning to make their way around the country, the album is starting to feel more like a gift—a reminder of the stubborn hope and perseverance that's helped me and so many other Chicagoans work toward a better future. I'm looking forward to the day when I can pop into a club to see Cam bring an entire crowd onstage for the late-night funk jamboree “Keep It Moving.” —**LEOR GALIL**



Mark Lanegan TRISTAN LOPER

continued from 35

MARK LANEGAN, *DARK MARK DOES CHRISTMAS 2020*

Rough Trade

roughtrade.com/us/mark-lanegan/dark-mark-does-christmas-2020

Mark Lanegan has made an album to satisfy the yuletide yearnings of those who find holly and hell-fire equally enchanting. Even before his old band Screaming Trees hung it up in 2000, the singer-songwriter had begun his career as a serial collaborator—highlights over the past 20 years include his work with Queens of the Stone Age, his three albums with Belle & Sebastian's Isobel Campbell, and his Gutter Twins project with Greg Dulli—but in 2012 he added to his equally impressive solo discography by self-releasing a six-track EP of holiday songs titled *Dark Mark Does Christmas 2012*. Available exclusively at his shows, the record has since become a sought-after rarity among his fans. This fall, Lanegan dusted off his holiday finery and resurrected the Dark Mark name to release this romp through a mix of Christmas standards, originals, and other fare—it includes all six tracks from the 2012 EP plus four new cuts. *Dark Mark Does Christmas 2020* kicks off with a take on “The Cherry Tree Carol,” a ballad that dates back at least to the 15th century and retells a Virgin Mary story borrowed from an apocryphal gospel. Lanegan shirks angelic trimmings, instead opting for a plucky banjo lead and a lilting, folksy atmosphere. On a standout version of the traditional “O Holy Night,” Lanegan clambors up the peaks of his vocal range, trading his trademark gravelly drawl for high-flying, Jeff Buckley-

esque belting. The majority of the album uses sparse instrumentation, but on the songs he wrote, Lanegan indulges in collaboration and experimentation: Dulli lays down the acoustic-guitar bedrock of “A Christmas Song,” and the eerie “Death Drums Along the River” pits sleigh bells against electronic beats. Lanegan closes the album by swapping snowy clichés for sinister balladry on a cover of “Burn the Flames,” by 13th Floor Elevators founder and psych legend Roky Erickson. Scrubbing away the original's acid-pocked indulgence, Lanegan delivers an uncanny message to the scrooges and scoundrels within all of us. The album stays true to Lanegan's customary bleakness, which speaks especially well to the somber mood of a holiday season spent in pandemic-enforced isolation—maybe 2020 will also be remembered as the year Dark Mark saved Christmas. —SHANNON NICO SHREIBAK

JOSEPHINE FOSTER, *NO HARM DONE*

Fire

josephinefostermusic.bandcamp.com/album/no-harm-done

Back in ye olde early aughts, “freak folk” ruled the land. Championed and perhaps encouraged by photogenic weirdo Devendra Banhart, artists influenced by elegiac or subliminally psychedelic folk acts from the 60s and 70s—Tyrannosaurus Rex, the Incredible String Band, Michael Hurley—started coming out of the woodwork. For a hot strange minute, indie record bins were dominated by worshipers of UK folk (Espers, Nick Castro & the Young Elders), delicate and idiosyncratic singers (Joanna



Josephine Foster MARK BORTHICK

Newsom, Scout Niblett), and sublimely earthy fingerpicking guitarists (Jack Rose, James Blackshaw). Standing apart from the crowd was Josephine Foster. With her fondness for opera, her powerful pipes à la Jefferson Airplane-era Grace Slick, and her reverence for the ancient and old-timey traditions that the likes of Fairport Convention and Shirley Collins had recontextualized in the 70s, Foster approached the music from a decidedly nonrock perspective. Her lo-fi early recordings, such as the 2001 CD *Little Life* (reissued as a ten-inch by Fire in 2013), sound like wax cylinders from another century. Later in the 2000s, the Colorado native played in poppy Chicago duo the Children's Hour (with guitarist Andrew Bar), the rustic Born Heller (with bassist Jason Ajemian), and full-tilt acid-folk rock band Josephine Foster & the Supposed, all while maintaining a solo career. By the next decade, she'd moved to Spain, whose musical traditions further colored her sound. She's since returned to Americana strangeness, collaborating with Nashville folk collective the Cherry Blossoms on the 2019 album *Mystery Meet*.

Foster's new album, *No Harm Done*, reminds me of some of the best work she's ever recorded, specifically 2005's *Hazel Eyes, I Will Lead You* (which Fire reissued last year for Record Store Day). It turns out that's no coincidence: my favorite tune on the album, “Sure Am Devilish,” dates back to the early 2000s. The song is classic Foster, accompanying her distinctive voice—airy and laconic but piercing and controlled—with wavering guitars and piano. It's equally soothing, unnerving, heady, and catchy. Foster's secret weapon on this album is Matt Schneider of Moon Bros., with whom she quarantined in Nashville this spring. Schneider's old-

school 12-string guitar adorns the ragtime-flavored lead track, “Freemason Drag,” and his serene pedal steel and supple electric bass grace the gorgeous “The Wheel of Fortune,” where Foster sounds every bit the weary and worldly globe-trotting vagabond she is. The hymnlike “Conjugal Bliss” is a song Foster often plays at weddings, accompanying herself with a chiming autoharp. Her freak-folk past rears its head on the esoteric “Love Letter,” which ambles along in a nearly indecipherable meter that Foster has described to me as “completely irrational.” Now that's how the freakiest of folk comes to be, folks! Not every song on this album has been kicking around in Foster's brain for years the way “Sure Am Devilish” has: she and Schneider also collaborated on new tunes, including the sublime, partially improvised “Old Saw,” which Foster tells me “sort of washes all my chakras clean.” She says she set out to create “something mellow” on *No Harm Done*, because “the times call for gentleness.” I say she and Schneider have succeeded—with every listen, I drift further into bliss. —STEVE KRAKOW

ELECTRIC HYDRA, *ELECTRIC HYDRA*

Majestic Mountain / Tee Pee

electrichydra.bandcamp.com/album/electric-hydra

When it comes to music, Sweden is perhaps most famous for sweetly catchy pop and brutal death metal. Five-piece Electric Hydra finds the spiritual midpoint between those genres on its self-titled debut album by leaning into another Swedish tradition—retro hard-rock revivalism. The record's



Electric Hydra  COURTESY THE ARTIST

cover art brackets the band's name with two gaping snake maws that look like tattoo flash, and the music is very much what you'd expect from that: 34 minutes of adrenaline-pumping, stadium-size pop-metal goodness. The band isn't especially interested in innovation—this is music for true believers, and they'll find ample reason for fervent head-banging in the spirit of hairy heroes of rawk's past. On "1000 Lies," guitarist Jonathan Möller and bassist Ellinor Andersson lock into a doomy, gonad-rumbling riff reminiscent of *Master of Reality*-era Sabbath while lead vocalist Sanne Karlsson does an ear-serrating and very credible Ozzy impression. Möller sings on "Iron Lung," which embraces grunge with enough fuzz to suit Mudhoney or Soundgarden. "It Comes Alive" cranks up to Motörhead speeds, with sweetly cheesy hair-metal harmonies buried in the mix and a gratuitous echo effect on Karlsson's voice. Electric Hydra never takes its biker boot off the accelerator as it blasts out heavy hooks and hooky heaviness that could please fans of Abba and Entombed alike. —NOAH BERLATSKY

FREDDIE OLD SOUL, THE FIRST PEOPLE
 Self-released
freddie1.bandcamp.com/album/the-first-people-2

Chicago rapper Fredrianna Harris, aka Freddie Old Soul, uses hip-hop to open a vivid window into everyday life. On "Hot Tamale," one of the best tracks off her new self-released EP, *The First People*, she turns groceries into a narrative device that bundles up seemingly stray musings about young motherhood, COVID-19, and the unrelenting presence

of death. Her arch delivery bridges her scattered ideas, and her incisive wordplay demonstrates that some of them were interconnected all along. Even on "Break Bread," where Harris excoriates powerful pop-culture figures who give nothing but lip service to righteous Black causes, you can still feel how much she enjoyed finding the best way to make her verses swing and blossom within the beat. *The First People* is a brief album, but Harris nonetheless finds enough room to foreground many of the complications of pandemic life. —LEOR GALIL

KATATONIA, DEAD AIR
 Peaceville
peaceville.bandcamp.com/album/deadair

Katatonia were fresh off a hiatus when they dropped their 11th studio album, *City Burials*, in April, but the pandemic meant they couldn't stage the triumphant return tour it merited. In May, the nearly 30-year-old Swedish metal outfit appeared their fans and assuaged their own frustration with a livestreamed concert. More than six months later—with the live-music circuit in Europe and the Americas still on hold—they've released *Dead Air*, a beautiful, melancholy, tight, and almost seamless document of that online performance. The recording raises the question of what a "live album" means when there's no live audience—surely this is somewhere between a studio effort and a traditional live album. The band had invited their fans to vote for the songs they'd play, so *Dead Air* is literally a collection of crowd favorites recast in Katatonia's current intricate, streamlined style. Three tracks from



Freddie Old Soul 📷 COURTESY THE ARTIST

continued from 37

City Burials—“The Winter of Our Passing,” “Behind the Blood,” and “Lacquer”—nestle comfortably among material that dates back to 2001 (“Tear-gas”), which makes the album work as a thank-you note to longtime devotees and a solid introduction for newcomers. There’s no substitute for the energy a live crowd brings to a performance, but *Dead Air* is a testament to the various ways artists can reach their audiences when touring is impossible. If you watch the videos from the livestream the band has made available before you listen to the album versions on *Dead Air*, you’ll get more of the emotional context: front man Jonas Renkse sounds great but looks sad (arguably with more reason than usual) in his neon-lined sound booth. Katatonia’s elegiac style of melodic gothic metal rises to the moment beautifully; “Ghost of the Sun” sounds like a cathartic cry, and “Forsaker” swings from rage to mourning in a heartbeat. Katatonia have optimistically booked a full schedule of in-person European festival dates starting in March 2021; whether those shows go as planned remains to be seen, but with COVID-19 vaccines on the way, maybe the band will be able to make up for lost time by next fall. —MONICA KENDRICK

LIVE SKULL, DANGEROUS VISIONS

Bronson
liveskull.bandcamp.com/album/dangerous-visions

Few recordings transport me directly to a time and place like *Dusted*, the 1987 album by foundational New York noise-rock band Live Skull. Founded in

1982 by guitarists Tom Paine and Mark C., Live Skull were a buzz saw of guitar-led postpunk that combined art-rock sensibilities with leather-jacket sneer, almost perfectly encapsulating the early-80s Lower Manhattan scene that birthed them. *Dusted* came fourth among the seven studio releases of the band’s initial incarnation, before one too many lineup changes and a lack of commercial success led to their breakup in 1990. It’s also the first to include lead singer Thalia Zedek, who’d go on to form the band Come with Chris Brokaw of Codeine and maintain a long, productive solo career.

Live Skull don’t get the recognition of their 80s NYC scene peers (say, Swans or Sonic Youth), but their music continues to resonate with fans of post-punk and avant-rock. Last year, Mark C. and Live Skull drummer Richard Hutchins (he’d joined in 1987) led a resurrected version of the band on the album *Saturday Night Massacre* (Bronson), which also includes appearances from Zedek and original bassist Marnie Jaffe; it combines the band’s classic vigor with lyrics decrying police brutality and misguided men in power. And on this month’s *Dangerous Visions*, Live Skull mix a few new songs (recorded by Mark C., Hutchins, and two new members) with previously unreleased music, including a set cut in 1989 for John Peel’s BBC radio series. Zedek had come aboard in 1987, infusing the band with new energy and allowing Paine and Mark C. to concentrate on their guitar wizardry, and the second half of this record, including the Peel tracks, features her lead vocals. The pulse of “Adema” is so fast that it sounds like Zedek’s lyrics are in a footnote with Hutchins’s drumming, and it must’ve blown the roof off the place when they played it back in the day. The live material works well among



Tatsu Aoki and Mwata Bowden of the Miyumi Project 📷 KEN CARL

the new tracks and outtakes—for longtime fans like me, it feels like an unexpected visit from an old friend. And a new version of the *Dusted* song “Debbie’s Headache” shows a reinvigorated Live Skull, with a mix that highlights Mark C.’s spoken-word-style vocals rather than a haze of guitar feedback. —SALEM COLLO-JULIN

LOCAL NOBODIES, SEE WHAT HAPPENS

Self-released
localnobodies.bandcamp.com/album/see-what-happens

In their hip-hop duo Local Nobodies, Chicago rapper Sulaiman and funk multi-instrumentalist Chris Mathien (who also leads the band Mathien) unlock each other’s debonair charms in song. On their self-released second album, the new *See What Happens*, they embellish their grooves with sophisticated flair, and Mathien’s smooth, subtle production leaves Sulaiman plenty of room to show off the musicality of his voice. On tracks such as “Levels” and “Marmont,” he stretches his words casually and luxuriously, like he’s relishing the sensation of each vowel on its way out. The pair can summon a mood with the barest of elements—all they need is a laid-back, loungey guitar riff, an occasional dubby blast of percussion atop the mellow drum track, and Sulaiman’s echoing vocals to give “Old Souls” a magnetism that outlasts its 59-second run time. See *What Happens* is confident and fun, but many of its songs are so short that the album feels like an aperitif—when Local Nobodies get down to the meal, I have a hunch that their name will start to feel like misnomer in no time flat. —LEOR GALIL

THE MIYUMI PROJECT, THE BEST OF THE MIYUMI PROJECT

FPE Records
fperecs.bandcamp.com/album/best-of-the-miyumi-project

Tatsu Aoki left his native Tokyo in 1977 to study experimental film and settled in Chicago two years later. In addition to making films, he improvises, composes, and conducts music, playing bass, shamisen, and taiko drums, and by the early 1990s he’d connected with the local jazz scene, developing a particular affinity with past and present members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. In 2000 the tireless polymath founded the Miyumi Project, named after his third child, to express his sense of himself as an Asian American artist. Like the AACM’s flagship band, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the Miyumi Project invests combinations of musical styles with a ceremonial vibe. The ensemble’s size and instrumentation have changed over the past two decades, but certain elements persist. The soulful, woolly horns, usually played by Mwata Bowden and/or Edward Wilkerson Jr., affirm the band’s connection to jazz. The percussion, which often includes members of Aoki’s family on taiko drums, is steeped in Japanese folkloric styles. And Aoki’s bass playing, which encompasses raw drones and bold rhythms, connects the two like a sturdy wooden bridge. *The Best of the Miyumi Project* lives up to its name by selecting standout tracks that showcase the contributions of some of the great musicians who’ve passed through the group over the years, including cellist Jamie Kempers, electric guitarist Rami Atassi, and the late trumpeter Ameen Muhammad. —BILL MEYER



GOSSIP WOLF

A furry ear to the ground of the local music scene

WOLF BY KEITH HERZIK

THE HIDEOUT has hired art-pop mastermind and **Soooper Records** co-owner **Sen Morimoto** as its new talent buyer. He replaces **Sullivan Davis**, who began training him last week. “The Hideout’s got such a great legacy, and people really love what it’s about and stands for, and I hope I can maintain that reputation,” Morimoto says. He appeared on the radar of Hideout co-owners **Tim and Katie Tuten** early this month, and they quickly hired him. Morimoto wants to book more artists of color at the club, as well as more younger musicians—and the gradual rollout of COVID-19 vaccines has boosted the odds that the Hideout will host in-person concerts in 2021. Morimoto may even hit the road himself, despite his new job, though he says that’s likely at least a year away: “Once touring happens, we’ll have to see what comes about.” The Tutens, Morimoto says, “have been super supportive in the process of sorting that out. They told me from the jump that they understand I’m an artist and that comes first.”

Ever since local psychedelic country collective the **Keener Family** released their debut EP, *Tender Beast*, last December, Gossip Wolf has been eager to hear more from this self-described “boot-gaze” crew. In May, the group—basically front man and multi-instrumentalist **Christopher Keener** and a pool of collaborators—dropped a lovingly despondent cover of “Down the Drain” (originally by Ben Clarke of Quarter Mile Thunder), and a three-song EP of new tracks, *Hold Me Close*, finally arrives on Friday, December 18, via nonprofit Chicago label **Park Service**. The Keener Family’s rich melodies float languorously atop warm guitars and strings heavy with reverb—guest players include Mute Duo steel guitar wizard **Sam Wagster** and keyboardist **Alex DeGroot**, who’s appeared on several albums with Zola Jesus. —**J.R. NELSON AND LEOR GALIL**

Got a tip? Tweet @Gossip_Wolf or e-mail gossipwolf@chicagoreader.com.

CHICAGO SHOWS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT IN THE WEEKS TO COME

ALL AGES FREE



Patti Smith STEVEN SEBRING

NEW

Avett Brothers 12/31, 7 PM, livestream at nugs.tv
Bad Religion 12/26 and 1/2/2021, 4 PM, livestream at nocapshows.com
Joan Baez 1/9/2021, 7:30 PM, livestream at seated.com
Blackpink 12/26, 11 PM, livestream at youtube.com
Peabo Bryson, Will Downing 3/13/2021, 8 PM, the Venue at Horseshoe Casino, Hammond
Dark Tranquillity, Obscura, Nailed to Obscurity 9/15/2021, 7:30 PM, the Forge, Joliet
Grabbitz 1/9/2021, 8 PM, livestream at lpr.tv
Hives 1/21/2021, 1 PM; 1/22/2021, 2 PM; 1/23/2021, 6 PM; 1/28/2021, 4 AM; 1/29/2021, 5 PM; 1/30/2021, 1 PM, livestream at thehives.com
Home Free 3/18/2021, 7 PM, Genesee Theatre, Waukegan
Miki Howard 1/2/2021, 7 PM, livestream at citywinery.com
New Year's Eve virtual celebration featuring George Howe and friends 12/31, 9:30 PM, livestream at davenportspianobar.com
Jason Isbell & the 400 Unit

12/31, 8 PM, livestream at fans.live
Tommy James & the Shondells 4/3/2021, 7:30 PM, Genesee Theatre, Waukegan
Apollo Mighty 1/11/2021, 1 PM, livestream at audiotree.tv
Mobley 2/27/2021, 8 PM, livestream at mobleywho.com
Now, Now 1/8/2021, 8 PM, livestream at audiotree.tv
Powerglove 3/16/2021, 7:30 PM, the Forge, Joliet
Johnny Rivers 2/28/2021, 5 PM, Arcada Theatre, Saint Charles
Frankie Rose 1/14/2021, 8 PM, livestream at lpr.tv
Sevendust 1/8/2021, 8 PM, livestream at nocapshows.com
Patti Smith and her band present a live birthday performance 12/30, 8 PM, livestream at pattismith.veeps.com
Sweet Honey in the Rock 1/17/2021, 2 and 7 PM, livestream at thirdrow.live
Tribute to Ozfest featuring Killer of Giants, Sandblasted Skin, Zero Signal, and more 1/15/2021, 7:30 PM, the Forge, Joliet, 18+
Umphey's McGee 1/1/2021, 7 PM, livestream at fans.live
Bob Weir & Wolf Bros 12/31, 9 PM, livestream at fans.live

UPDATED

Airborne Toxic Event 4/14/2022, 7:30 PM, the Vic, rescheduled
AJJ, Xiu Xiu, Emperor X 3/12/2021, 7 PM, Metro, canceled
Apocalyptica, Lacuna Coil 9/5/2021, 8 PM, House of Blues, rescheduled, 17+
Shawn Colvin, Daphne Willis 5/13/2022-5/14/2022, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston, rescheduled
Lauren Daigle, Johnnyswim 3/12/2021, 7:30 PM, Allstate Arena, Rosemont, canceled
Four C Notes 12/31, 6 and 8:30 PM, Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire, Lincolnshire, canceled
Monophonic 11/27/2021, 8 PM, Chop Shop, rescheduled, 18+
Murder by Death, Amigo the Devil 3/13/2021, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, back on sale, 17+
Gregory Porter, Ledisi 2/17/2021, 7 PM, Chicago Theatre, canceled
Ben Watt 2/18/2021, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston, canceled

UPCOMING

Acid Mothers Temple & the Melting Paraiso U.F.O. 2/26/2021, 8 PM, Subterranean
AJR 12/26, 7 PM, livestream at universe.com
BoDeans 2/13/2021, 8 PM, North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, Skokie
Bush Tetras 1/23/2021, 8 PM, livestream at lpr.tv
Circa Survive 1/16/2021, 6:30 PM, Concord Music Hall, 17+
CSO Sessions episode eight Available through 1/1/2021, livestream at cso.org
Anthony David 12/26, 6 PM, livestream at citywinery.com
John Doe (solo) 1/20/2021, 8 PM, livestream at mandolin.com
The Dreamscapes featuring Selina Trepp with Ben LaMar Gay, Lia Kohl, and Macie Stewart, Santiago X, Rhonda Wheatley, Lise Haller Baggeson with the Funs, and more 1/16/2021, 2 PM, livestream at mcchicago.org
Driver Era, Wrecks 2/19/2021, 7:30 PM, the Vic
Fuzz 2/4/2021, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Sarah Harmer 2/12/2021, 8 PM, Szold Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music
Jayhawks 1/10/2021, 3 PM, livestream at mandolin.com
Julian's 2020 New Year's Eve House Party at the Drive-In featuring Stevie B, Angel, Bad Boy Bill, Hula, Joe

Smooth, David Torres, Lidel Townsell, White Knight, To Kool Chris, Julian "Jumpin" Perez, Tim "Spinnin" Schommer, and more 12/31, 8 PM, Chicago Drive-In Bridgeview, Bridgeview
Kiss 2020 Goodbye Live Tour from the Atlantis Dubai 12/31, 11 AM, livestream at tixr.com/groups/landmarkslive
Little River Band 1/28/2021, 7:30 PM, Genesee Theatre, Waukegan
Lu's Jukebox with Lucinda Williams, episode six 12/31, 7 PM, livestream at mandolin.com
Nombe 3/27/2021, 8 PM, Lincoln Hall
One Night of Queen featuring Gary Mullen & the Works 3/27/2021, 8 PM, Rosemont Theatre, Rosemont
Parks N Rec featuring DJ Quiana Parks and guests 1/3/2021, noon, livestream at twitch.tv/moveforwardmusic
Parsonsfield, Oshima Brothers 3/30/2021, 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Jeremy Pinnell 3/5/2021, 8:30 PM, Carol's Pub,
Chuck Prophet & the Mission Express 3/18/2021, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Purity Ring 5/3/2021, 7:30 PM, Riviera Theatre
Pvris, Royal & the Serpent 4/7/2021, 8 PM, House of Blues
R&B Spring Fest featuring Brian McKnight, Tevin Campbell, El DeBarge, Res 4/24/2021, 8 PM, Wintrust Arena
Rage Against the Machine, Run the Jewels 7/12/2021-7/13/2021, 8 PM, United Center
RBD 12/26, 10 AM, livestream at seroparecer.world
LeAnn Rimes 2/5/2021, 7 PM, Genesee Theatre, Waukegan
Eric Roberson 4/1/2021-4/3/2021, 8 PM, City Winery
Dan Rodriguez 5/22/2021, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Rookie 4/16/2021, 10 PM; 4/17/2021, 9:15 PM, Empty Bottle, 4/16 sold out
Maggie Rose, Them Vibes 2/13/2021, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Peter Rowan's Free Mexican Airforce, Los Texmaniacs 5/20/2021, 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Russ 5/22/2021, 7:30 PM, Aragon Ballroom
San Fermin 6/4/2021, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music
Lauren Sanderson 4/13/2021, 7:30 PM, Subterranean
Santana; Earth, Wind & Fire 7/3/2021, 7 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley

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Park
Satsang 5/14/2021, 8 PM, Martyrs
Secret Sisters, Logan Ledger 5/21/2021, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music
Sepultura, Sacred Reich, Crowbar, Art of Shock 3/14/2021, 7 PM, House of Blues, 17+
Shallou 6/17/2021, 8 PM, House of Blues
Sheila E. & the E-Train 7/13/2021-7/14/2021, 7 PM, City Winery
Amanda Shires, Jade Jackson 4/21/2021, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Ricky Skaggs 4/11/2021, 5 PM, Arcada Theatre, Saint Charles
Bria Skonberg 3/14/2021, 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Chris Smither 4/1/2021, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Sole e Amore ("Sun and Love") featuring Enrique Mazzola with members of the Lyric Opera's Ryan Opera Center 2020/21 Ensemble 2/21/2021, 6 PM, livestream at lyricopera.org
Southern Hospitality featuring Damon Fowler, J.P. Soars, Victor Wainwright 6/18/2021, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Steeley Dan, Steve Winwood 6/25/2021, 7:30 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park
Strfkr, Undercover Dream Lovers 2/9/2021, 7:30 PM, Thalia Hall
Marty Stuart & His Fabulous Superlatives 4/18/2021, 3 and 7 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music
Sunflower Bean 1/7/2021, 8 PM, livestream at lpr.tv
Tokimonsta 2/13/2021, 7 PM, Metro, 18+
Louis Tomlinson 4/15/2021, 8 PM, Chicago Theatre
Happy Traum 4/17/2021, 2 PM, Szold Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music
Vanishing Twin 1/20/2021, 2 PM, livestream at noonchorus.com
Phil Vassar, Lexie Hayden 7/16/2021, 8 PM, Joe's Live, Rosemont
Video Age 2/25/2021, 9:15 PM, Empty Bottle
Weathers, Moby Rich, Kenzo Cregan 2/28/2021, 7 PM, Schubas
Jontavious Willis 1/28/2021, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston



Don't expect President Biden to change the corporate-driven status quo. GAGE SKIDMORE

NATIONAL POLITICS

Democrats and ruling by fear

When politicians sell out to win, we all lose.

By **LEONARD C. GOODMAN**

Leonard C. Goodman is a Chicago criminal defense attorney and co-owner of the newly independent Reader.

I have written many columns at the *Reader* and other alternative publications warning that corporate control of the federal government will bring catastrophe for our children and for the planet. I receive a lot of pushback, especially from liberals who argue that Trump is/was such a unique menace that the Democrats had no choice but to join with corporate America to assure victory.

The Democratic Party sold out working people long before Donald Trump. It was President Bill Clinton who pivoted to Wall Street. Clinton then ended the main federal antipoverty program (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), passed NAFTA, escalated the drug war, and ended the New Deal restraints on big banks, leading directly to the housing meltdown and the Great Recession of 2008.

Later, Barack Obama took in record amounts of Wall Street cash for his 2008 presidential campaign. Then, as e-mails obtained by WikiLeaks later revealed, he allowed Citigroup to select nearly his entire cabinet, which helped funnel trillions of bailout dollars to the banks, declined to prosecute a single Wall Street executive for mortgage fraud, and blocked legislation capping executive pay at bailed-out firms.

The Democratic Party now uses this same fear-based argument every four years: support our corporate-backed candidates or else you will get someone more horrible. By allowing the party to control us by fear, we invite further betrayals.

Nor should we accept the premise that Democrats have to sell out to win. Bernie Sanders relied on small donors rather than corporate bundlers and PACs, and he raised plenty of money to compete. Indeed, Sanders likely would have won the nomination had not the corporate-backed candidates joined

together, at Obama's urging, to support Joe Biden before Super Tuesday.

Moreover, candidates who take policy positions favoring the 95 percent rather than the five percent are much cheaper to sell and thus don't need to raise huge sums of money. For one thing, they can call out their opponents for being tools of corporate interests, a devastatingly powerful argument that is unavailable to most Democrats and Republicans. Yes, it's true, voters prefer representatives who are not in the pocket of big business.

To illustrate this point, in the elections last month, voters approved dozens of ballot initiatives brought by public interest groups that relied on grassroots organizing rather than expensive media campaigns. Arizona voters said yes to a tax surcharge on incomes above \$250,000 a year specifically to raise teacher pay and recruit more teachers. Oregon voters approved a populist proposition to put strict controls on the corrupting power of big-money corporate donations in elections. Floridians voted to raise the state's minimum wage to \$15 an hour, a working-class advancement vehemently opposed by corporate giants. Colorado voted yes to require corporations to let employees earn paid time off for medical and family needs. Voters in six states—including in such supposedly conservative bastions as Arizona, Montana, Mississippi, and South Dakota—approved initiatives legalizing marijuana and other drug use.

The groups sponsoring these voter initiatives did not have corporate backing. They won because ordinary people liked what they were offering.

Contrary to what you hear in corporate media, the policies pushed by progressives are not radical or scary to ordinary people. Recent polls show that three in five Americans favor Medicare for All, two in three support a wealth tax, and even higher numbers support free college tuition. The Green New Deal is likewise broadly popular, even when respondents are informed that it will cost trillions of dollars.

In other words, the story propagated by corporate media that Americans are afraid of change is a lie. A recent *New York Times* article illustrates how the deceptive game is played. The piece tries to make the point that Americans don't want real change by quot-

ing South Carolina representative James Clyburn, who cautioned that if Democrats pursued policies like Medicare for All, "we're not going to win." What the article didn't mention was that Clyburn has taken more money from the pharmaceutical industry in the past decade than any other member of the House or Senate.

Some readers accuse me of unfairly painting all corporate leaders as evil. This is untrue. I come from a family of corporate leaders who have high integrity. The reality is that publicly traded companies have no morality. They are profit-seeking engines. The personal views or morality of corporate directors is immaterial. They are under fiduciary obligation to seek maximum profits for the shareholders. Thus, if greater profits can be made by offshoring production to a country with lower wages and less environmental restrictions, this will be done even if it means screwing American workers and destroying the environment.

Allowing these profit-seeking engines to direct public policy—the current practice of D.C. Democrats and Republicans—will bring destruction to our country and planet. This is not hyperbole.

Consider the example of foreign policy. The American people don't want forever wars or the bloated Pentagon budget that currently consumes well over half of our discretionary funds, and is greater than the military spending of the next nine countries combined. Meanwhile, one in eight Americans don't have enough food to eat and 30 million Americans will soon be at risk of losing their homes.

But the American people have no say in the matter. Tragically, America's foreign policy is controlled by the military-industrial complex and by the resource extraction industries. Bomb makers like Raytheon demand zones of active conflict to keep its assembly lines moving. Under Trump, our bombs fell at the rate of one every 12 minutes, killing thousands of defenseless Black and Brown people in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen; surpassing Obama's record of one bomb every half hour. Many of the people we slaughter are civilians; none were threatening to invade the United States.

Manufacturers of big-ticket items demand hostile relations with larger nations like Russia and China to justify new sales of aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, F-35 fighter jets, and new generations of nuclear bombs. The mineral extracting industries demand

OPINION

that we maintain our empire of nearly 800 foreign military bases to crush the will of local people who oppose foreign exploitation of their lands.

None of this will significantly change under President Biden. Just this month, while Congress bickered over whether to provide relief to desperate Americans, both parties joined together to approve \$741 billion for the Pentagon, assuring that the war machine will be well funded for another year.

The status quo also ensures the continued deterioration of the planet. The U.S. war machine is one of the largest polluters in history, consuming more liquid fuels and emitting more climate-changing gases than most medium-sized countries. In 2017, the U.S. military bought about 269,230 barrels of oil a day and emitted more than 25,000 kilotons of carbon dioxide by burning those fuels.

If the American people could choose our next secretary of state—the nation's chief diplomat—they would select someone skilled at negotiating with our adversaries and easing tensions around the world. But the war industry demands a toady with the opposite skill set. So Biden has selected Antony Blinken, a man whose career has been a pendulum between government and the defense industry, where he made himself rich by writing memos advocating for new smarter more sustainable wars, and by selling his Rolodex of government contacts to help clients obtain defense contracts. Within the Obama administration, Blinken backed the interventions in Libya and Syria as well as the 2014 Ukraine coup, and he was a major proponent of backing the Saudi-led mass atrocities in Yemen. The fact that all these policies were disastrous for the people on the ground is not a negative for Blinken, because they were also highly profitable for the war industry. Blinken's greatest career achievement appears to be his ability to keep Pentagon budgets rising while transitioning from Bush-era ground wars to smaller scale "sustainable operations."

Thus, under Biden, we must expect more dead children, more destabilization and suffering, and more global warming.

Some believe that the Democratic Party can still be rescued from the clutches of its corporate masters by electing progressives. This strategy is currently being tested. Progressives get themselves elected to Congress promising to stand up to the establishment Democrats and to fight for things like universal health care. Right now, they have a

chance to demand a debate and floor vote on Medicare for All (MFA), a bill introduced in February 2019 by Representative Pramila Jayapal with dozens of cosponsors, but never brought to the floor despite its overwhelming popularity with Democratic voters. Because the Democrats now have such a slim majority in the House, a handful of progressives in Congress could force a vote on Medicare for All in exchange for their support for Nancy Pelosi's reelection as speaker.

This idea that progressives might use their leverage to force a vote on Medicare for All was not proposed by any member of Congress but by Jimmy Dore, a comedian and activist, on his YouTube show. Yet his plan has gained wide support on social media. Dore has called out Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other progressives for shrinking away from the fight over MFA after running on the issue and promising to stand up to Pelosi and the corporate Democrats. Forced to respond, AOC called Dore's strategy too risky because the Dems might lose the speakership. But Speaker Pelosi can guarantee her reelection simply by scheduling a floor vote on a bill introduced almost two years ago with dozens of cosponsors, supported by 85 percent of Democratic voters, and about half of Republican voters. That is not an unreasonable demand of the speaker.

AOC also says we might lose the vote on MFA. But if not now, when? We are in the middle of a deadly pandemic, and we all need our neighbors to be able to go see a doctor if they feel sick without fear of bankrupting their families. Fifteen million Americans have already lost their health insurance and their jobs. Dore asks—are the House progressives fighters or are they posers?

The progressives had similar leverage back in the spring when the big donors demanded that Congress pass the CARES Act, giving Wall Street \$5 trillion and an assurance that it would face no hardship from the shutdown. But progressives let that leverage slip away and then accepted only scraps for working people, many of whom have been forced to stay home for months with no income. Now is the time to demand that the richest country on Earth provide health care to its people.

Of course, a government-run health care system will hurt the profits for big pharma, big insurance, and big hospital groups. But we all must sacrifice in times of great struggle. **A**

@GoodmanLen

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SAVAGE LOVE

'Tis always the season for tongues, toys, and lots of lube

Livestream questions about monsters in bed and mothers-in-law

By **DAN SAVAGE**

Q: I remember the day I was able to come to your show in person. What a joy! It seems like years ago now. How do you maintain your sanity until we are able to go to concerts, theater, museums, and dinner with friends again? I strive to be a good human but struggle to stay my upbeat self.

A: I find it helps to remember that concerts, theater, museums, dinners with friends, holidays with family, club nights, fetish parties, etc., are coming back—sadly, the same can't be said for the people, jobs, and homes so many have lost. Helping others when and where you can is an excellent way to maintain your sanity,

I've found, and your question prompted me to make another donation to Northwest Harvest, a wonderful organization that supports hundreds of food banks in my corner of the country, so thank you for that.

Q: How would you deal with Trumpist (still!) relatives living with you during the pandemic? My mother-in-law is here helping with newborn baby care and she brings up Trumpist talking points constantly and Trump permeates most other topics, like the pandemic.

A: If I didn't need the childcare, I would toss her ass out. If I needed the childcare but not so

desperately that I couldn't risk losing it, I would tell my mother-in-law to STFU or GTFO—and if my MIL complained or tried to play the victim after I told her off, I would print every photo I could find online of a Trump supporter in a "FUCK YOUR FEELINGS" T-shirt after the 2016 election and wallpaper the guest bedroom with them. But if I desperately needed the childcare and couldn't risk losing it, I would smile and nod and fully stock my supply of edibles.

Q: I need someone to tell me that it isn't a sign that I see my ex's name at least four times a day, every day. He dumped me almost three years ago and it's ridiculous. Can you do that for me?

A: If you see his name multiple times a day, well, that's most likely a sign your ex has an extremely common first name. And if you attach meaning to those sightings, that's a sign you're human. We have a tendency to see patterns where none exist and read meaning into random events. If your ex has a really uncommon name and you see it everywhere, well, that is most likely a sign that your ex is fucking with you.

Q: My partner is a loving sweet human but he has a serious preference for women in rather small bodies and I am . . . well, I am not small. I want him to have what he wants and we are nonmonogamous, but it's hard to shake the feeling that I am not—and can never be—enough for him. He is unable to say that he'll desire me no matter my size. This is painful. I know he'll love me no matter what but I also want to feel desired. I'm finding it hard to find a middle ground where we both get what we need. Any advice to bridge the gap?

A: That your boyfriend couldn't bring himself to tell you what you wanted to hear . . . that he couldn't tell you what he hoped would be true (that he would always desire you) even if he suspected it might not always be true (a day might come when he no longer desires you) . . . that all makes me wonder whether your boyfriend has the emotional intelligence that you—that anyone—would want in a partner. And while it's no consolation, I realize, many couples struggle to sustain desire over time, as any regular reader of an advice column knows. Boredom is more often to blame than aging or changing bodies, I believe, but there's no way to guarantee that the person we're with now will always desire you the same way they do now—or that you will always desire them the same way. That said, the single best way to get over feeling like you're not enough for someone is to accept that you aren't. Trying to be everything to someone is not only exhausting, it's always futile.

Q: I just wanted to say thank you. I called in to your podcast a couple years ago because I'm a spanking fetishist and a married pastor found me on FetLife and lied to me and manipulated me! I did what you said and reported him and he doesn't work at that church anymore. I wanted to let you know that I'm living my dream life in LA with a spanko guy I met at a fetish gathering. He has been the best quarantine buddy a person could ask for!

A: Thanks for the update and congrats!

Q: My husband has a big dick and wants to try butt stuff. I have had anal in the past with other partners with smaller penises. Honestly, I'm a little scared so I'm not in a rush here but want to please my man eventually. How do we go about priming my hole? Thanks!

A: Tongues, toys, lots of lube, and the first time you get that monster in you, that's all you're going to do—get it in. He gets hard and lays back and you take charge of the pace and depth of penetration. And then it's not about him fucking you, it's about him staying still and you relaxing and breathing until that thing feels good in there. Even then he doesn't get to fuck you. Instead, you masturbate the first few times his dick is in there—you get to come, not him. Having a few orgasms with his cock in you—or having a dozen—will create the kind of pleasurable association that leaves your hole craving his cock. Then you fuck.

Q: My older brother is a 38-year-old straight male in New York. When COVID hit, his fiancée's tendency to believe in conspiracy theories became more apparent and their relationship quickly declined. He's a progressive, liberal-minded, deeply moral person and she's from a family of right-wing gun collecting Scientologists. Recently they separated to collect their thoughts. Ultimately they agreed to separate. It's now been two weeks. They still live together and are confused about what to do next. My question is, what advice do you give to someone who knows what they need to do but is too paralyzed to do it?

A: Don't give your brother advice, give him time. It's only been two weeks! And you don't need to give him advice if he starts to waver—you don't need to tell him what to do—you just need to give him a pep talk. He knows what he has to do. Give him support, moral and practical, not advice. ☑

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Emil Ferris
Author

Emil Ferris is a graphic novelist whose first book, *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, has been praised by critics since its publication in 2017. Her book—which presents itself as the lined notebook diary of a preteen self-avowed werewolf who questions her sexual identity—is set in Chicago in the 1960s.

The book is autobiographically infused, as Ferris—like her protagonist Karen Reyes—was witness to the highly-charged political and social climate of that time.

The main character's obsession with B-movies of the Hammer and Universal varieties and EC horror magazines is evident. Journalists have noted how the book parallels themes of monstrosity and "otherness."

Not only are EC-inspired horror comic covers recreated in ballpoint pen by Ferris's protagonist, but so are many significant paintings that hang in the Art Institute of Chicago.

Ferris was profoundly shaped by the world-renowned collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. She sites art-making as being critically important to her survival of childhood disability as well as subsequent physical challenges.

Hence, the story of the graphic novel's production is nearly as interesting as the book itself.

In 2002, at 40 years of age, Ferris was bitten by a mosquito and infected with West Nile virus. She suffered lower body paralysis as well as the substantially diminished use of her dominant drawing hand.

Consequently Ferris enrolled at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and during her student years was introduced to such graphic novels as *Maus*, *Jimmy Corrigan*, *Persepolis*, and *Fun Home*.

While studying, Ferris recovered enough of her drawing ability to create her graphic novel. She left SAIC with a bachelors in art, a graduate degree from the writing program, as well as the first 24 pages of what would later become *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*.

My Favorite Thing Is Monsters has now been published in nine languages and has been honored with numerous awards, among them the Lambda Literary Award, multiple Eisners, the Ignatz, and the Fauve d'Or at the Angoulême Festival in France.

Ferris has exhibited her art extensively in the U.S. and Europe and was most recently honored to teach classes at the Louvre.



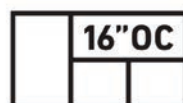
Coya Paz
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Coya Paz is a writer, director, and lip gloss connoisseur who was raised in Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, and the United States. She is the Artistic Director of Free Street Theater, a cofounder of the Proyecto Latina collective, and served as the founding co-Artistic Director of Teatro Luna for nine years. Coya is an Associate Professor in The Theatre School at DePaul University and holds a PhD in Performance Studies from Northwestern University. She is a regular commentator on race, politics, and pop culture for *Vocalo.org*, and the co-author (with Chloe Johnston) of *Ensemble-Made Chicago: A Guide to Devised Theater*. Above all, she believes in the power of poetry and performance to build community towards social change. Visit her on the web at coyapaz.com

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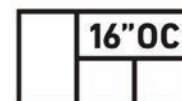


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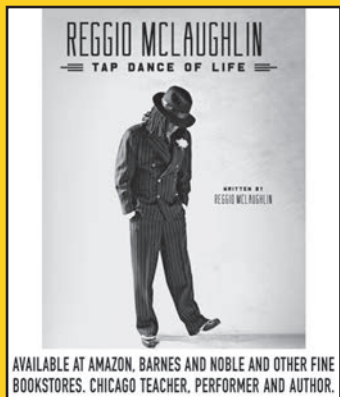
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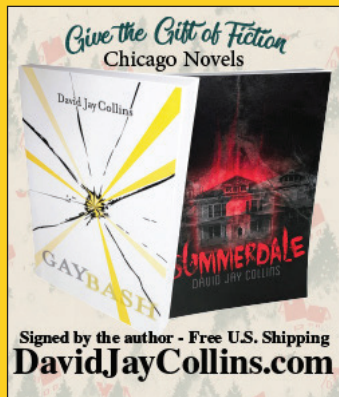
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